

## ABSTRACT

An innovative cross-cultural arts integrated language program in Brazil reveals powerful truths about teaching and learning.

# A Constant Search

## Arts-Integration in Cross-Cultural Environments<sup>1</sup>



Kurt Wootton

Several years ago, The ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University, of which I was then director, decided to take a journey. It was a journey across borders, across countries, and most important, across cultures. It was a journey that would change the way we viewed our role in educational reform here in the United States and abroad, and it would eventually culminate in a teaching lab school in rural Brazil. Partnering with Brazilian educator Daniel Soares in the town of Inhumas, we gathered twenty-five teachers and artists from Brazil and the United States who spent the three weeks of the summer of 2006 teaching 180 Brazilian students both Portuguese and English utilizing the arts as a primary vehicle for literacy and language development. During and after this summer lab school experience, we interviewed teachers and students and found common threads that have implications for arts education both in Brazil and in the United States.

One morning in this lab school, the students and teachers were all in their classrooms. I needed to have a private conversation with a colleague so we stepped outside the walls of the school onto the red dirt streets. As we began to talk in English, a boy of about eleven years, whose name I later learned was Thiago, stopped his bicycle on the street next to us. We continued talking,

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as he stood leaning on his bike, in rapt attention. Finally my colleague turned to him and asked, in Portuguese, if he understood English. He said, "No." Then he asked, "What is happening in there?" and he pointed inside the walls of the school. We explained that teachers from the United States and Brazil were teaching a summer school and continued our conversation in English. Thiago remained there, on the street, listening to us, holding onto the handlebars of his bicycle.

The next day, I was walking the hallways of the school when I saw Thiago, on his toes, peering into the windows of an English language classroom. I asked him if he wanted to join the class. He nodded and the teacher and class welcomed him; they were getting ready to

perform poems they had written. After that first visit, Thiago returned to the summer school every day, arriving early, before classes began. Eight days later he performed a poem in English in the city hall for his community.

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I often wonder what Thiago saw when he peered in the windows of the classrooms. If he saw what I observed throughout the summer, he watched students performing, painting, singing, dancing, and laughing as they learned English and Portuguese. He witnessed a community of students and teachers

learning from each other about different cultures and languages, and maybe he thought, "I want to be a part of this. How can I get into this school?" It seems this is a question we want all our students around the world to ask, rather than thinking to themselves, "How can I get out?"

Ten years ago we started the ArtsLiteracy Project in the Education Department at Brown University with the goal of developing literacy through the performing arts. In our lab school at Brown Summer High School, teachers from the local schools partnered with artists from the community. Throughout the summer they worked together to co-teach a group of high school students from the Providence area. We thought if the teachers and artists listened and observed each other they would absorb each other's best qualities. The artists would learn about students' literacy development and the teachers would learn how to infuse performance into the day-to-day life of their classrooms. As the years progressed, the lab school expanded beyond Providence, and teachers and artists from around the world—Brazil, Kenya, India, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic—came to teach at Brown Summer High School. When teachers from around the world teach with each other, they share common experiences as well as best teaching practices. Often as teachers, schools, and even districts, the lessons we learn about education remain isolated. When we share across boundaries of any kind—with the teacher next door, with the school down the block, or in the case of the teachers at Brown Summer High School, with teachers from other countries—we learn about each other's successes and we can incorporate these lessons into our own work. One teacher in Brazil put it this way: "If we can all come to form a true community of practice where we share across and among cultures, we will push the collective to a much higher place."

Our idea of bringing together people from different countries was already a reality in local public school classrooms. In its first year, ArtsLiteracy began working in a classroom labeled "newcomers" in the community of Central Falls, Rhode Island. These newcomers to the United States had recently immigrated from Guatemala, Cape Verde, Brazil, Poland, Bosnia, Puerto Rico, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Ecuador. The work in Central Falls with

culturally diverse students showed us that we needed to change the way we thought about literacy development. Many students had difficulty reading and writing not only in English but in their first language as well. It was necessary for us as an organization to move beyond a concept of literacy as delineated by reading and writing only in English. To be effective in helping students develop literacy, we needed to embrace the development of both first and second languages. Furthermore, beyond language, there was a need to provide a bridge between the home cultures of the students and the culture of the public school. In her book *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*, Sonia Nieto highlights the importance of bridging cultures:

The conventional wisdom is that if native languages and cultures are used at all, it should be only until one learns the *important* language and culture, and then they should be discarded or burned. It is definitely a one-way street with no turning back. The metaphor of the bridge suggests a different stance: You can have two homes, the bridge can help you cross the difficult and conflict-laden spaces between them. (115)

The students in Central Falls were learning how to create this bridge between their native language and culture and their new language and culture: they were becoming bicultural. To effectively reach these students, and to help build a literacy bridge between languages, we needed, as an organization, to experience the same journey. We needed to build Nieto's "two homes." It wasn't a journey that would result in a set of neat answers but one in which we would learn a new way to talk about teaching and learning. As one of the teachers in Brazil later described her professional development experience, "ArtsLit is not a prepared and ready program. We as teachers have to be in a constant search." As an organization we needed to take similar risks we were asking of our teachers in our professional development experiences. We knew we wouldn't arrive at a set of ready-made teaching methods that could serve as a recipe for teaching in cross-cultural classrooms. Most important, we knew that we would need to begin a search and embrace Spanish poet Antonio Machado's words: "Wanderer, there is no road/The road is made by walking."

Here in the United States, I think about Thiago peering into the classroom when I see what is happening increasingly in our public schools: a move toward the standardization of teaching and learning. This standardization is most readily apparent in the increasing emphasis on testing. Yet it does not stop at mandated tests; many school districts are making dramatic moves



A Brazilian student reads a poem in English.

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toward literacy and curricular programs. What typically seems to happen in a school district is first a new superintendent is hired. Then he or she promises rapid changes and quickly adopts a series of wide-ranging programs. These programs move a step beyond the traditional textbook in that they actually dictate not just the classroom content but the methods the instructor must use as well; some even require the teacher to read a moment-to-moment script. The superintendent often stays for two or three years at the most, leaving a supposed "teacher-proof" curriculum in place, a curriculum that disempowers the teacher and typically offers the students a series of rote activities. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire refers to this kind of standardized teaching when he writes:

Unfortunately, in general what has been done in schools lately is to lead students to become passive before the text. Exercises in reading interpretation tend almost to be verbal copies of the text. Children learn early on that their imagination does not work: Using their imagination is almost forbidden, a kind of sin. (83)

As these trends toward standardization increase in the United States, the ArtsLiteracy Project has been experimenting with teaching methods that embrace creative approaches to literacy development using performance, dance, photography, puppetry, and visual art. Through a Fulbright grant, Daniel Soares was the first international visitor to the lab school at Brown, where he began to see some of these ways of infusing arts through learning. Returning home to Brazil, he began to transform his practice of teaching second languages in his own school and in his teaching position at a local university. To further explore these issues we decided to create an ArtsLiteracy summer lab school in Daniel's hometown of Inhumas. We took with us twenty teachers, arts educators, and graduate and undergraduate students from the United States. We planned to create an equal balance between staff from the two countries and the various cultures and languages represented. With that in mind, we designed the school with several principles:

1. **Integrate the arts throughout the entire school.**

The synthesis of art forms with language development was the founding principle of the school. Music, performance, dance, visual art, and especially literature were essential to the day-to-day experiences of the classroom.

2. **Extend the school into the**



Teaching artist Elizabeth Keiser leads students in performance work.

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**community.** To give the classrooms a sense of urgent, common purpose, everyone in the school was to have the opportunity to publicly perform in the city hall for the larger community. Students knew they would perform for their grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and children.

3. **Create a no-cost, heterogeneous environment.** The students' ages ranged from seven to sixty years old because we invited not only the younger students but their families as well. Some classrooms even included multiple generations of the same family.
4. **Design the school to be bicultural and bilingual.** We accomplished this in three ways. First- and second-language classes were offered in Portuguese and English. Professional development for the teachers and all public announcements were simultaneously translated into two languages. Finally, every American teacher or artist co-taught with a Brazilian teacher or artist.
5. **Establish *The Performance Cycle* as the framework for learning.** All teachers in the school, Brazilian and American, participated in a weeklong professional development seminar run by teachers from both countries. The guiding framework for this week was the Performance Cycle, a process for teaching literacy and language developed by the ArtsLiteracy Project (see figure 1) that embeds literacy development in a larger framework that emphasizes the social nature of literacy learning.

By beginning with an emphasis on "Building Community," students and teachers create a safe space whereby they feel comfortable taking risks writing and sharing work that matters to them and may be of a personal nature. "Entering Text" involves, through visual or performative teaching approaches, inspiring students to want to read the text in and out of the classroom. In "Comprehending Text," students read the text deeply and wrestle with questions that get at the aesthetic and intellectual center of the text. They read beyond a search for surface answers such as, "Who is the protagonist?" or "What is the setting?" and instead wrestle with the text's central ideas. By "Creating Text," students become actors in the world rather than passive receivers of information. Inspired by their reading of the text, they create their own new and original work. Finally, they "Rehearse and Revise" their work until they feel it is excellent, at which time it is exhibited for the larger community in the form of performances or art exhibitions. Throughout the process, teachers and students engage in "reflection" by taking the time out from the sometime hurried move towards the culminating event to step back and consider how they might improve the artwork, a piece of writing, or a theatrical scene.



Students rehearse performances.

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A students in the Brazil summer lab school.

## 6. Full documentation of teaching and learning.

By means of video, interviews, photography, and written reflection, the experience of the school was thoroughly captured.

## Interview Results and Implications for Arts Education and Education Reform Today

What emerged from these interviews with teachers and students has implications for arts education as well as school reform in general and perhaps points to some of the principle reasons why Thiago wanted to come to school that day. We first thought the teachers and students would talk more about learning reading, experiences in the arts, or learning English, but

they didn't. They talked about their relationship with friends and teachers in the school. They talked about how they connected what they read and wrote to their lives. They also talked about how these moments were moments of laughter and joy. The interviews revealed three clear elements.

### I. School as a Family Environment

"Building Community" is an essential element of the ArtsLiteracy Project's Performance Cycle. However, in interviews, the students did not use the word community, rather they used the word family in a context that has a deeper resonance than the way the word community is typically referred to in education today. A high school student explained: "At the lab school everybody gets a family, friends, a house, trust, and courage to live." Another student discussed her experience at the school:

The school is special because we study in small groups and we end up like a family where everybody speaks only English. We learn with each other. We have the opportunity to express

our feelings, thoughts, and share opinions, which makes studying a pleasure. We can really learn in a pleasant way, and by reading, we learn much more than a foreign language, we learn life.

The idea of community has become part of the educational jargon in the school reform movement. Terms like “professional learning community” or “communities of practice” proliferate as ways to describe teacher communities in schools. Certainly, there is a value in using these terms, and schools do need to embrace systems where teachers can exchange ideas, but in Brazil the word *family* revealed something more profound. Nieto highlights the importance of what she calls “family motifs” in schools in order to reach students from multiple



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A student in the Brazil summer lab school.

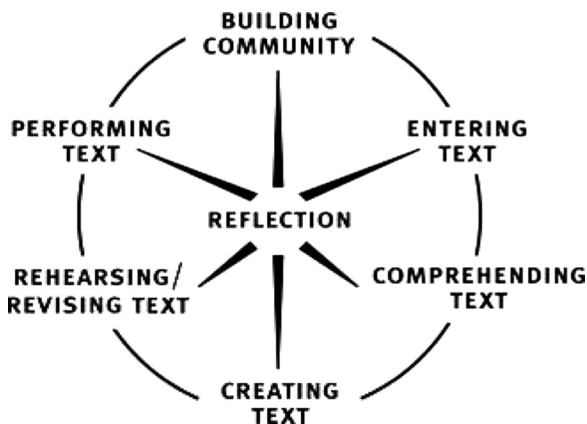


Figure 1. The Performance Cycle. Source: Eileen Landay and Kurt Wootton, the ArtsLiteracy Project in the Education Department of Brown University

backgrounds: “Failing to do so,” she writes, “perpetuates the message that not everybody belongs there” (93).

Many schools in the United States are increasingly moving away from “family motifs.” Through grades, ranking, and testing we place a value on separate student identity, even competitiveness. The emphasis of quantitative results and data-driven accountability is contrary to the kind of interconnected experiences we need to provide for our students. It is particularly disturbing that this emphasis on data collection



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A teacher from Brazil and the United States relax during a break.

and reporting has also become pervasive in the field of arts education. Federal and state sources for arts education funding often require standardized test data as a way of measuring the effectiveness of arts programs. Grants are given based on an evaluation design that requires the use of “control groups.” Borrowing terms from the medical field, the control group does not receive the “treatment”—in this case the arts program—

whereas the treatment group does. By comparing the test score data we can then supposedly judge the effectiveness of the arts initiative.

It is time to steadfastly rebel against this way of thinking about and assessing arts education. Treating our students as measurable data quickly lets them know how little, as a society, we value them as complex and multifaceted human beings. Arts education has the greatest potential to inspire family motifs in the classroom. Theater, music, and dance groups are referred to as ensembles. Ensembles laugh together, cry together, dialogue about substantive ideas, and wrestle with difficult challenges as they move toward a culminating performance. In the visual arts students share some of their deepest work as individuals in classroom and community exhibits. These experiences often inspire students to return to visit a school years later after graduation and say to their teacher, “I never would have made it through school without Ms. Mandell’s black box theater.”<sup>2</sup>



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Students rehearse performances of their original poems in English.



## 2. Learning in the Classroom Connected to the Inner Lives of Students

Reading, writing, and performing are not separate acts; they are holistic and connected experiences that help us know each other and ourselves. The students represented in the following examples were reading a wide range of literature, writing their own poems, and performing for both their classmates and their community. A fourteen-year-old boy stated:

At the school, I learn to read, to understand and make use of this in my life. Books by Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and books like *Bless Me Ultima* and especially *Antigone* changed my life. They helped me to think and to live the life. They showed me that I am the happiest person in the world and that I exist and that that is enough. After learning to read and write and think, we start to write poems, so I start to know my heart and my desires.

A sixteen-year-old girl said:

More than anything, poems are fantastic because they do much more than show you who you are. They involuntarily bring ties to the lines, some lessons that are different for each person

who reads a poem . . . .

This different point of view about poems showed me how easy and important it is to be myself.

A teacher from Brazil communicated in an e-mail:

Actually, if there were reasons for literature and poems to exist, I do believe one of these



Students perform in front of their class.

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Students perform in the city hall in Inhumas, Brazil.

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reasons would be to make our lives more beautiful. If it was not because of that, why would I care to read a book? Students like to think about how they would say the words from a love sonnet to the person they love. That's why I say that reading a beautiful poem is like saying "Wow, that's me there!" Furthermore, students like to create texts and poems filled with words they take from their hearts. Text and poems that give them an identity. Texts and poems that give them the opportunity to show how beautiful we people are inside!

In the field of education reform, connecting learning in the classroom to life outside is another familiar theme. The reflections of these students demonstrate a different relationship between the classroom and life. They describe an internal and emotional connection to the content they are studying. Their approach to reading the text, in this case poetry, has a vitality involving the aesthetic and even spiritual dimensions of the art form. In the classroom, poetry becomes a living and breathing object with which students were able to reflect critically on themselves and the world around them. Furthermore, the text provides inspiration for students to create their own work.

Paulo Freire, in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, describes literacy development as a process of "creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context" (43). If students participate in routine activities with text, in isolation from their own lived worlds, the study of literature becomes a deadening experience. This can be one of the dangers of arts integration: offering students static encounters with art objects, whether they take the form of poems, paintings, or symphonies. How-

ever, when they have the freedom to create their own work, in response to the art object, what Stevenson and Deasy refer to as a "third space" is created, a space where the interaction between the student and the work transforms his or her conception of self.



Students rehearse performances of a fairy tale.

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### 3. Teaching and Learning as an Expression of "Alegria"

*Alegria* is a Portuguese word that is difficult to completely translate into one English word because it has elements of joy, happiness, celebration, love, and laughter. This feeling per-

vaded the classrooms in the lab school every day. Often the sound of clapping, singing, dancing, and laughing would flow out of the classroom windows into the courtyard. Teacher/artist partners in the lab school gave constant attention to creating a community that celebrates and applauds. One of the Brazilian teachers wrote, "Learning can really happen in a place where happiness is present. Learning and laughter go along very well." A community of shared *alegria* is a place where both teachers and students want to be.

Another student spoke to the feeling of *alegria* when he described the relationship between the students and literature: "Somebody in a book said that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever.' The school tries to teach English through having students in love with words forever. And I believe the only way to be in love with anything or anybody is seeing its infinite beauty." *Alegria* then wasn't just a feeling; it was a way of approaching the teaching of content in the classroom.

Freire affirms the importance of "a school that creates, that speaks, that loves, that guesses, that passionately embraces and says yes to life" as opposed to one "that quiets down and quits" (*Teachers as Cultural Workers* 83). Throughout his work, the Brazilian educator portrays a school culture that embraces and cares for its teachers and students. For schools to be culturally relevant we need to move them beyond small curricular changes, such as adding *House on Mango Street* to a reading list for a language arts classroom or inserting a few more diverse historical figures into the history curriculum. It's time to move beyond multicultural day or month to fundamental changes in school cultures. The students in Brazil are pointing to ways we might change school cultures in their entirety. Arts integration, when it has the elements emerging from the interviews, has the potential to affect, and even transform, students and teachers. A fourteen-year-old student in Brazil expresses this when he writes:

Writing a poem was just putting myself inside out, it was just using the essence of myself as ink, so I could write. When I finished writing my first poems it was like breaking up the chains of not believing myself and taking flight into a sky of infinite possibilities.

Arts education, at its best, allows students to fly into this sky of infinite possibilities. It provides a space for them to show who they are—in all their complexity—to their teachers, friends, and communities. Perhaps, instead of introducing more standards and policies, we need to ask our students, our teachers, and our schools, "How can we begin a constant search to create school cultures that provide a home for all of our students?"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from a talk titled "A Constant Search" presented by Kurt Wootton for the Arts Education Partnership Forum in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 28, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>A former student of Central High School in St. Paul, Minnesota, said this to me in an interview about theater teacher Jan Mandell and her youth company, Central Touring Theater.

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