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## Bringing Meaning Back: Adding Significance to Arts Curriculum

Arturo Ortiz

*California State University, Monterey Bay*

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Bringing Meaning Back: Adding Significance to Arts Curriculum  
Arturo Ortiz

California State University Monterey Bay

### Abstract

A lackluster attitude towards art projects can lead to students that do not value art or creativity. Instilling a reach beyond the school population and completing art projects that hold intrinsic value adds meaning to the works being produced. If time is taken out of other curriculum to focus on the arts, it is in students' and teachers' best interests to have that class time have real significance. Staff and parents of Clinton Elementary were interviewed for their views on creating opportunities to imbue meaning to art curriculum. After the data was compiled and analyzed, several action options were created. A public auction of student artwork was the highest recommended action option. The auction allowed students to see their work posted in various places in the community and imparted meaning into their work. Students' ability to take pride and ownership in their work allowed them to find meaning in their work.

## Meaningful Art

I remember learning about George Washington, and the arts integration section of that lesson being: color George Washington's uniform! There is no emotional impact in an assignment like that. Coloring some dead guy's uniform tells you nothing about who I am as a student. How I am processing this information. What I feel. Assignments like that do not affect you emotionally. It is just a sheet of paper created to meet certain criteria in the classroom. There is no true meaning in that.

Many people recognize the power of art and creativity in the classroom. Because of that, many schools are integrating art into their curriculum. Arts integration is a very logical reaction to learning about the benefits of arts education. There is one big drawback to integration though. It focuses on the primary subject being taught and the art section of the lesson is left behind and often not explored fully. Just like the George Washington coloring assignment. I love creating things. There is a lot to be said about making something. It creates a sense of self-satisfaction. It boosts confidence and creativity. It brings joy to you and hopefully others. It helps release feelings that we are unable to let out sometimes. Art can help you find your voice or express yourself where your words might fail. It can bring people together that might not have known about each other otherwise. That is why I love art.

The majority of the artwork I created in elementary school was never designed to last beyond the summer. It was not designed to be seen by other people besides my parents seeing it in a folder at the end of the school year. Sure, my parents said my stuff was well-done and they were proud of me, but there was not anything in there that I felt any connection to. And not just visual art, but singing, dancing, and theater. We never had a class play. We only sang songs written by other people that did not consist of lyrical content we could relate to. We learned how

to play *Mary Had a Little Lamb* on recorder. None of these things hold any meaning. Many of my classmates, including myself, could have used the positive side-effects of creating meaningful art.

I see very disheartening parallels between my art education and my daughter's art education thus far. And she loves art. She paints, sculpts, draws, and dances. My wife and I encourage her to explore these creative outlets. We have some of her paintings hanging around the house, and they hang in some of our other family members' homes as well. I know my daughter feels proud when she sees her painting framed and on the wall at her cousin's house. I would love for her classmates to feel that as well. That is why I am here. I want to give these students the opportunity to find their voice. To express those feelings they don't know how to. To make something for others to appreciate. To create something meaningful. Art is only art, if it is meaningful to someone. Most of all, it should be meaningful to the creator.

#### Literature Review: What is the Problem/Opportunity?

The lack of meaningful art can lead to a lackluster sense of creativity in students. Creativity is hailed as a positive trait found in many people that succeed in their fields. Instilling a sense of creativity in students at a young age can lead to greater success as productive members of society. Grytting (2000) states:

We hope that our students will be successful in their chosen fields and, no matter what the field may be, creativity is among the tools required for success. Creativity is necessary to generate scientific theories and mathematical models. It is needed to develop new software. (p. 1)

Creating art that can be performed, shared, and helps students find their voice can spark a sense of creativity in students. The Content Standards for California (2018) state: "The arts convey

knowledge and meaning not learned through the study of other subjects. Study in and through the arts employs a form of thinking and a way of knowing based on human judgment, invention, and imagination (p. ix).” This shows that the board of education fully recognizes the importance of proper arts education in our curriculum. Various studies have shown that integrating art into curriculum has a positive impact on students’ learning. If we treat art as something to be proud of that creates emotional impact, then the positive effects of teaching can only be increased. Art allows students to self-express in ways that no other subject allows.

The lack of meaningful art is an issue I am interested in because although art may be integrated into the curriculum, there is no lasting work beyond the scope of the school year. There are no works that students can look back on years later and think, “I made that, and I enjoyed making it.” Many art projects are forgotten rather quickly and hold no lasting significance for its young creators. Most artwork is easily forgotten over the summer between grades. It is difficult to properly define “meaningful art,” but I will try. Meaningful art could be defined as an art project that is meant to have a bigger impact on students beyond filling up a folder at the end of the school year. Different art forms besides drawing and painting could increase the impact of certain artwork. Group-based projects that are too big to take home but are easily viewed by the school/community can also carry significance. Ultimately, meaningful art is a work that requires deep understanding and self-expression.

### **Why is it an issue?**

Lack of meaningful art education in curriculum is an issue in elementary schools that have difficulties completing all mandatory standards. Art is often integrated into other subject work and is more of an “add-on” to the primary subject being taught.

Adding art lessons as an afterthought to other subjects removes the benefits of proper art education from the art lessons being given. The lack of proper arts education can lead to a lack of creativity in students. Dwyer (2011) states, “decades of research show strong and consistent links between high-quality arts education and a wide range of impressive educational outcomes” (p. vi). Proper arts education fosters creative thinking. It is when we stifle that creativity that we end up with lackluster students and eventually lackluster adults. Truly successful people can express their creativity in their work, no matter what field they work in. Innovation is where creativity meets skill. We are only teaching skills to students when we ignore arts curriculum. Skill without creativity is a dull knife. It is a tool that could function much better with some simple honing.

Students that show more creativity feel better prepared for the future (Susnea, Pecheanu, Dumitriu, & Cocu p. 325). Removing that stress from students early on allows them to feel more at ease with their learning. Most of us can agree that the less stress put on our students, the better. The reduction of stress allows for better learning to take place and allows for students to open up and find their voice when they would otherwise be uncomfortable doing so. That is made easier when given a method to express themselves through the arts.

### **What should be done?**

There should be more art programs in schools. Integration is one way that is often used, but it only teaches that art is a secondary subject in school. It teaches that art is not important. If the number of hours of art education is impossible to increase, then the work coming out of that time should hold some more meaning. A class mural designed to last and be appreciated by the rest of the student body and community fulfills many of these necessities. A class play can fulfill these as well. A class movie does the same thing. There are many ways of learning the basic building blocks of arts education while creating something meaningful. There are two ways to

give meaning to artwork. The easiest and most obvious way is to make it BIG! A mural, a concert, a play. These are all ways of creating something that is too big to ignore. It is designed to be seen by a community. If a student helps create something with their classmates, they are more likely to get a sense of accomplishment or draw meaning from their artwork.

Teaching art curriculum in a meaningful manner is the simple answer. Although, just because it is simple does not mean that it is easy. It costs money to fund the arts programs at schools and more money is always needed in our educational systems. Art is often integrated into other subjects at school, and it is obvious that it is not working. In addition to these factors, it is difficult to create something that holds meaning to each student. It is up to instructors to create curriculum that can hold meaning for students. Hiring outside artists to help create said curriculum is one way to tackle that problem. Longo (2010) states:

Every group of students that passes through the school doors brings a different level of understanding, energy, and creativity. Regardless of state mandates, we must deliver a curriculum that is motivating, properly aligned to state frameworks, and applicable to real-life events through the medium of inquiry learning.

We must do better for our students. If we do not, how can we expect them to do better for us in the classroom?

The benefits of creativity extend far beyond the classroom and school. Shively, Stith, & Rubenstein write: “Specifically, creativity promotes healthy psychological functioning, student intrinsic motivation and creative self-efficacy, learning and long-term knowledge retention, and prepares students to make meaningful societal contributions (2018).” It is not only in teachers’



best interests to teach students to be creative, it is in society's best interest.

## **Conclusion**

There is a growing need for meaningful artwork in our education system. Adding the meaning behind arts education is a key component in fostering creativity in our students. Creative students prosper in school and beyond. Arts education is often taught without that personal meaning for students. By adding that meaning, we can foster creativity and better prepare students for the future.

## **Method**

What do Clinton Elementary parents and staff have to say about the current status of long-term and/or meaningful art and how to increase opportunities for it? Fostering creativity by adding personal meaning to art projects is something that all schools could benefit from. Some examples of meaning in art projects are: projects that are designed to last beyond the school year, projects that involve the community, and projects that are reflective of the artists' viewpoints. After interviewing Clinton Elementary parents and staff, I will use what I have learned to positively address the lack of meaningful and community-based art opportunities. This is important because various studies have proven the positive benefits of art education both inside and outside of the classroom.

## **Context**

The site for this research is a K-6 elementary school in the city of Lactuca<sup>1</sup>, California with a Spanish language dual-immersion program. Lactuca is a world leader in agriculture and its economy reflects that. From a series of Native American tribes, to a Spanish settlement, to an

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym used to maintain confidentiality

international agricultural powerhouse; Lactuca has a rich history of growth and development.

The racial makeup of Lactuca is 45.8% White, 2.0% African American, 1.3% Native American, 6.3% Asian, 0.3% Pacific Islander, 39.2% from other races, and 5.1% from two or more races.

People that identified as Hispanic or Latino of any race were 75.0% ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)).

The student population at the Clinton Elementary School<sup>2</sup> consists of 0.9% African American, 0.3% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.7% Asian, 79.9% Hispanic or Latino, 14.3% White, 3.8% Two or More Races, and 0.2% Not Reported. Although the school is a Dual Immersion Spanish program, it still has a 29.6% (172/581) population of English language learners. The staff at the dual-immersion school consists of 50% Caucasian teachers, 42.3% Hispanic or Latino teachers, and 7.7% teachers of other races ([www.ed-data.org](http://www.ed-data.org)).

Clinton Elementary has a spacious lot with plenty of space for outdoor activities. It has a wonderful courtyard with gardens and a multi-purpose room that serves as the lunchroom, theater room, music room and art room. It was built in 1924 and has kept up with technology, despite having such an old architecture. The school was part of a dual opening with Roosevelt Elementary in 1924 with rising population due to the rising economic impact of local agriculture.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

I interviewed 3 parents and staff members from Clinton Elementary. This group of prospective participants were invited to participate because they have a child enrolled at Clinton School or their relevant experience in teaching various subjects at Clinton School.

**John Doe.** A white male parent of a third-grade girl in Mrs. Rossi's class.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym used to maintain confidentiality

**Jane White.** A white mother of a second-grade girl in Mrs. Vati's class. She is not a Spanish speaker but wishes for her daughter to be bilingual.

**Jack Power.** The principal of Clinton Elementary. He has a decade of experience as a teacher and principal.

### **Researcher**

- How and why is the concern personally meaningful to you?

I am a former music major with a great love for visual and performing art. I am a former student at Clinton Elementary School. I am also a father of a student at Clinton Elementary School. The lack of meaningful art for the sake of art in my and my child's experience so far is an area of growth that I would like to explore.

- What experiences, background knowledge, and personal qualities, skills, and/or talents qualify you to carry out this project?

My concentration of study in my pursuit of my B.A. in Liberal studies is Visual and Performing Arts. I am former guitar instructor. I am bilingual and am not afraid of reaching out to other resources to help instill meaningful art into the school.

- We all have biases; the most insidious are those of which we are unaware or unacknowledged. What makes you different from the "informants" and "influentials?" Is it race, ethnicity, social class, education, work experience, physical or mental ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.? How might these differences impact both your perspectives and work on the concern?

As a former student and a father of a student at this school, I have two unique "insider" viewpoints on this issue. A lifelong love and appreciation for the arts allows me to see the

positive impact that the arts can have on students both inside and outside the classroom. As a bilingual parent, I can reach out to non-native speakers more easily.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

The following questions were asked to 3 Clinton Elementary School parent/teacher participants.

1. What do you see as the potential benefits with increasing opportunities to create long lasting and meaningful art; or What are you concerned about when it comes to the current status of meaningful and community-oriented art at this school?
2. What is currently being done to improve the current status of meaningful/long-lasting art - by whom - and do you think this is good, bad, or indifferent? Why?
3. What do you think should be done about increasing opportunities for students to create meaningful or long-term art?
4. What do you think are the obstacles to adding opportunities for students to create long lasting and meaningful art as a community?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about increasing opportunities to create long-lasting/meaningful art projects and/or the improvement of community-based art projects?

### **Procedure**

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. When it was not

possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a phone interview or paper and pencil survey of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place in the Clinton Elementary office or courtyard. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews/surveys were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, Clinton Elementary School parents and staff were interviewed to see what they think could be done to increase opportunities for more meaningful art in curriculum. This is important because the arts are often forgotten, and their benefits are undervalued in our modern curriculum. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: variety of art forms, cost to the school, and community reach. A variety of art forms is important to create well-rounded artistic students. It also encourages creativity in students who are not inspired by drawing or painting. Cost to the school is important because money is needed fund all of the action options. Community reach is being weighed as well, because it is a great way to add meaning and significance to artworks beyond the classroom. Based on the evaluations of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Variety of Art Forms	Cost	Community Reach
Mural in Courtyard	Low	Low	Low
Student Art Auction	Medium	Low	High
After-School Movie Club	High	High	Medium

**Mural in School Courtyard**

The proposed mural in the school courtyard come in with the lowest cost, lowest variety of art forms offered, and the lowest community reach. It has the lowest cost because Clinton Elementary already has a community artist come in and give the students art instruction on certain days of the week. The artist brings a lot of supplies and materials for his meetings with students. The local artist is actually known for his mural work around the city. The artist could easily transition his curriculum to lead towards a school-wide, student made mural in the courtyard.

As a project, a mural offers the least variety of art forms. Painting, drafting, graphing, sketching are the main methods of art forms offered. This greatly ignores the performing arts and only focuses on a small set of visual arts.

The mural also had the lowest amount of community reach. This is due to possibly being made in the school courtyard. As perfect a location as the courtyard is, it is locked away from the public's view. The entire point of murals is to share them with the community and have everybody enjoy them.

### **Public Student Art Auction**

An auction featuring student made works was considered. It has the highest immediate community reach. Ideally, the auction would be driven by local neighbors and community businesses. Those neighbors would be the ones bidding on the student artworks. This leads to a very high and very immediate reach into the community.

The student auction also showed to be one of the lower cost options. This is due to the same reasons that the mural was low cost as well. The local artist brings supplies and materials for school use already.

The auction had a higher amount of offered art forms. The auction opened up to other forms of visual art. Sculpting, drafting, chalk work, pastels and many other forms of visual art were made available. Despite all this, the auction was still limited to visual arts and still completely ignored the performing arts.

### **After-School Movie Club**

The creation of an after-school movie club offers the highest variety of art forms. Writing, acting, set design, costume design, animation, sculpting, and cinematography are just a few of the art forms that can be instituted. The potential club is able to incorporate all the possible art forms from the other action options and many, many more. Performing arts were not only included, but encouraged and necessary for the club to function.

Along with the variety of art forms comes the highest cost of all the possible action options. All of those possibilities cost money. And arts programs budgets are not able to incur such high costs. The fact that the club would have to be after school also eliminated a lot of students from being able to participate.

With the advent of digital and online technology, movies are easily recorded and just as easily shared. The movie club had the potential to reach the highest number of community members if works were shared on the internet. But having people watch these student made videos at home on a couch was not the way that art is meant to be shared and experiences. For those reasons, the community reach for the after school movie club was rated medium.

### **Conclusion**

The recommended action option is creating an art auction showcasing students' works. It should be open to the general public to increase community visibility. The opening to the public allows for works to be out in the community, hanging in dentists' offices, agricultural company waiting rooms, law offices, and many other places. It has a low level of cost and the highest immediate community reach. In addition, the art auction can be used to fundraise for the school itself, further growing the budget for more auctions in the future and allowing for further expansion of the arts program at the school. One big negative aspect of the auction was the possibility for students to see their artworks drawing smaller bids than those of their peers. During post interviews with the school principal, it was determined that the best place to host the auction would be after school off of the school campus. There is parent's dance that could easily integrate and host the auction. It could easily be modified to host local businesses and community members. That would eliminate the possibility of students seeing the auction as a negative end for their works.



Although the after-school movie club allowed for the most art forms to be incorporated into the curriculum, it also had the highest cost of all the recommendations. The fact that it would have to be after-school also made it so that not all students would have a chance to participate. The student made mural in the courtyard was the most obvious choice. The local artist that works with the school is known for his mural work in the city. It also had a low cost of materials and could easily be worked on during class time. But the fact that it would be hidden inside the courtyard of the school gave it the least public visibility and the lowest community outreach of all the recommended options.

### **Action Documentation and Critical Reflection**

The focus of this capstone was the lack of meaningful art in school curriculum. Parents and staff members of Clinton Elementary were interviewed. The three action options of a student made mural, a student work art auction, and an after-school movie club were created. The recommended action option was the student art auction. It was recommended because it had a low cost, an immediate high community reach, and a medium amount of variety in art forms offered by it.

### **Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection**

The action option of hosting a student auction was recommended to the president of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) and to the principal of the school. The results section of the paper was presented in a handout for the president and principal to review and share with other staff members and parents in the PTO. See the appendix for a copy of the proposal presented. The persons with whom the handouts were shared were very excited to see the reasoning and logic behind the recommended options. They both felt that something else was needed to take the lessons from the local artist to the next level.

When it was discovered that students could potentially see their artworks drawing smaller bids, the auction started to seem like a bad idea. Once the idea to host it off campus was created, it changed the spirit of the auction originally envisioned. Initially, a student-led small-time auction that was more for fun was imagined. Once it was seen to be potentially be at an adult event, it made the auction seem more classy and higher fundraising numbers were imagined. The principal and parent were on-board with the idea.

It would have been much easier to know that there was a local artist already coming to the school providing art instruction. It might have actually led to having this capstone taking place in a different school. The local artist is evident that the school recognized the importance of art instruction and that the school was already doing something about it.

It was obvious that the author of this paper was a lover of the arts. It was not immediately apparent that he was as passionate about them until this research. It is hoped that he can pass that passion onto his children and the next generation in general.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

I am much more versed in the subject of education and pedagogy. I am a former guitar instructor and thought I had a good idea of what helped people learn. Apparently, it is not as universal as I had initially thought. The required service learning hours for the Liberal Studies degree has forced me to open my eyes and interact with professionals in the field I wish to work in. I have also been able to begin to network in several local districts and have been told to apply to said districts after I achieve my credential.

I am able to speak on the topic of education and pedagogy much more eloquently. I now see that there is not a single effective method to education. And there is not a single way of learning as well. I have learned what is expected of a good public educator. I have also learned of

many resources I will be able to call upon in my future career.

I can say that I am much more versed in education on a global scale. I can see how society influences students, teachers, and education as a whole. For better or worse, history has its claws in our modern education system. It is up to modern teachers to fix the errors of our past and to preserve the methods that have rightfully earned their place in modern education. Culture is an often-ignored aspect in our education systems, but it should not be. Cultural background influences what we teach and how we teach it.

I can say that I am much more versed in creating curriculum and lesson plans than I was three years ago. The assignments and their use of technology and software have made me much more comfortable at creating educational plans. The presentations I have shown my teachers and peers have only better prepared me to lead a classroom in the future.

The ability of teachers to provide forward progress on a social justice platform is not one often mentioned. Through my classes and collaborations with my classmates, I have seen just how influential on society teachers can be. And with that influence comes the need for responsibility. Educators should be working to improve the situation on a social justice platform. Equity trumps equality and I can tell my peers exactly why that is.

I have qualified for my CSET waiver. That is evident of my achieved knowledge in the necessary subjects to teach in California. I feel confident in my abilities and knowledge to say that I could pass the CSET anyway. CSUMB has provided me with a great general education encompassing a variety of subjects needed to become a public educator in California.

I must educate myself beyond the surface of arts education. I cannot expect my students to be passionate without proper guidance. I must be able to not just spark creativity but show and give examples of how to express yourself in the arts. I would love to incorporate music into my

curriculum, and to be the teacher that students remember for helping them find a voice.

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## Appendix

## ARTS PROGRAM PROPOSAL

Arturo Ortiz  
Student  
California State University  
Monterey Bay

## CAPSTONE PROJECT SUMMARY

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### MURAL IN SCHOOL COURTYARD

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### STUDENT ART AUCTION

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### AFTER SCHOOL MOVIE CLUB

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With the advent of digital and online technology, movies are easily recorded and just as easily shared. The movie club had the potential to reach the highest number of community members if works were shared on the internet. But having people watch these student made videos at home on a couch was not the way that art is meant to be shared and experiences. For those reasons, the community reach for the after-school movie club was rated medium.

#### RECOMMENDATION

The recommended action option is creating an art auction showcasing students' works. It should be open to the general public to increase community visibility. The opening to the public allows for works to be out in the community, hanging in dentists' offices, agricultural company waiting rooms, law offices, and many other places. It has a low level of cost and the highest immediate community reach. In addition, the art auction can be used to fundraise for the school itself, further growing the budget for more auctions in the future and allowing for further expansion of the arts program at the school. One big negative aspect of the auction was the possibility for students to see their artworks drawing smaller bids than those of their peers. During post interviews with the school principal, it was determined that the best place to host the auction would be after school off the school campus. There is parent's dance that could easily integrate and host the auction. It could easily be modified to host local businesses and community members. That would eliminate the possibility of students seeing the auction as a negative end for their works.

Although the after-school movie club allowed for the most art forms to be incorporated into the curriculum, it also had the highest cost of all the recommendations. The fact that it would have to be after-school also made it so that not all students would have a chance to participate. The student made mural in the courtyard was the most obvious choice. The local artist that works with the school is known for his mural work in the city. It also had a low cost of materials and could easily be worked on during class time. But the fact that it would be hidden inside the courtyard of the school gave it the least public visibility and the lowest community outreach of all the recommended options.

For further details and information, please contact:

Arturo Ortiz  
arortiz@csumb.edu  
831-444-2732