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The Odyssey Project: Fostering Teacher Learning in the Arts

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Abstract

Canada's national cultural institutions and its largest bilingual university entered into a partnership to offer an integrated arts summer program for classroom teachers which featured artists collaborating with teachers to enhance their arts learning and improve their instructional expertise. This inquiry focused on a description of those dimensions of an arts partnership which foster teachers' personal arts learning. Findings indicate that an emerging group culture within the class, characterized by a sense of community, comfort and mutual support, fosters trust, emotional openness and personal risk-taking. These dimensions of the program enabled teachers to explore their own creativity, examine their thoughts and feelings, acknowledge each other's views, understand different perspectives, and engage successfully in artistic activities.

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s, faculties of education across Canada developed new partnerships with their stakeholders, such as school boards, community organizations and teacher federations, to deliver programs that are both effective and relevant (Gurney & Andrews, 1998, 2000). To improve the teaching of the arts disciplines - dance, drama, music and visual arts - an innovative integrated arts summer program for teachers was initiated in 1997 by the Arts Education Consortium, a partnership of Canada's national cultural institutions and its largest bilingual university. The program is comprised of two components: an intensive two-week summer session featuring artists collaborating with classroom teachers on-site in studios, galleries and concert venues, and a field-based action research project during the fall term. This project provides participants with the opportunity to engage in systematic inquiry in the arts within their classrooms during the academic year following the summer session.

Arts partnerships between arts organizations and educational institutions represent a viable alternative model of arts education (Rowe, Castenada, Kaganoff & Robyn, 2004; Hanley, 2004). The Arts Education Consortium is a partnership comprised of the Canadian Conference of the Arts, Canadian Museum of Civilization, National Arts Centre, National Gallery, National Library, School of Dance, and University of Ottawa. The Consortium supports teacher development¹ and research in arts education. A study entitled *The Odyssey Project*, a multi-year inquiry focusing on teacher development in the arts, was initiated in 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the Consortium's partnership program for enhancing teachers' arts learning and developing their instructional effectiveness.

The Context of Professional Development

Classroom teachers in Ontario, Canada's most highly-populated province, are expected to teach the arts - dance, drama, music and visual arts - within the elementary curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1998). This instruction is often undertaken by them without sufficient training or background (Pitman, 1998; Wilkinson, Emerson, Guillaumant, Mergler, & Waddington, 1992). As in many other jurisdictions, they are expected to help students see relationships and make connections in dance, drama, music and visual arts, the most common arts disciplines (Taggart, Whitby & Sharp, 2000), without a fundamental knowledge about the essential concepts and skills in the arts (Grauer, 1981; Kindler, 1987; Patteson, 2002; Smithrim & Upitis, 2001). For many classroom teachers, the arts disciplines are beyond their personal experience, and they avoid teaching the arts due to the anxiety it causes them (Oreck, 2004). Many teachers believe that the arts are important and allow students to draw on their unique strengths and talents, especially those students less academically-oriented (Bresler,

¹ Teacher development subsumes teacher education (pre-service), professional development (in-service) and graduate courses.

1992). However, they feel that teaching the arts is mandated of them without adequate professional development and sufficient support from administration (Andrews, 2001).

To address this situation, a summer session program was developed which features professional artists collaborating with teachers to integrate the arts across the curriculum. Throughout the course, teachers and artists develop, model and role-play lessons in and through the arts. Such collaboration develops teacher expertise (Rowe, Castaneda, Kaganoff & Robyn, 2004), builds teacher confidence (Wiggins, Wiggins & Ruthmann, 2004), and promotes professional growth (Wilkinson, 2000). Initially, the core elements of the arts disciplines are emphasized, that is learning in the arts, and then gradually, the focus shifts to learning through the arts as the course progresses. Teachers undertake creative, artistic activities, and they are encouraged to reflect on the meaning of such experiences for themselves and for teaching their own students. The program is offered on-site at the partner institutions in studios, classrooms, and concert halls - venues which foster authentic artistic experiences (Burgess & Addison, 2007). Artist selection is based on professional experience in an arts discipline, interest in teacher development, and commitment to arts education. Such a background is essential for the effective selection of artists (Myers, 2005). At the successful conclusion of the program, the teachers receive an additional qualification on their Teacher Record Card, entitled Integrated Arts.

Related Research

The central purpose of most arts-based in-service programs for classroom teachers across North America is not to transform them into arts specialists (Oreck 2004; McIntosh, Hanley, Verriour & Van Gyn, 1993). Rather, it is to develop their understanding of and effectiveness in using the arts as an expanded repertoire of teaching strategies and to promote creative learning environments (Fowler, 1996; Upitis, Smithrim & Soren, 1999). Learning to use new strategies requires personal motivation and willingness to take risks, which in the arts requires a significant shift in attitudes towards teaching and learning (Patteson, 2002; Smithrim & Upitis, 2001). Arts experiences involve open-ended learning and unique, personal responses in contrast to other academic subjects which focus on outcomes and correct answers (Eisner, 1994; Gardner, 1990; Wilkinson et al., 1992). Teachers must understand the instructional purpose, feel confident in their skills, and recognize the benefits to effectively teach the arts in their classrooms (Hord, Rutherford, Hurling-Austin & Hall, 1998; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003). Professional development in the arts for teachers can develop the requisite arts knowledge and expertise (Starko, 1995; Upitis, Smithrim & Soren, 1999). However, such in-service courses require more skill-based instruction to effectively employ the arts into one's own practice than would be the case in other academic subjects (Gurney & Andrews, 2000; Sarason, 1999).

Often it takes years for a teacher to feel capable of effectively teaching artistic skills and integrating the arts across the curriculum (Patteson, 2002; Upitis, Smithrim & Soren, 2003). Indeed, teacher self-efficacy and self-esteem are key to influencing arts use in teaching, more so than prior arts instruction, current artistic practice, or years of teaching experience (Oreck, 2004). However, the demands to improve test scores and deliver a standardized curriculum inhibit teachers' creativity and autonomy in the classroom (Amabile, 1996; Gordon, 1999). Limited space, lack of time and few professional development opportunities hinder the delivery of arts programs in schools (Baum, Owen & Oreck, 1997; Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991). Arts partnerships involving artist-teacher collaboration represent an effective alternative to traditional arts instruction in both schools and universities (Doherty & Harland, 2001; Smithrim & Upitis, 2001). Classroom teachers are more effective when supported by artists (Andrews, 2001; Burnaford, Aprill & Weiss, 2001; McVey & Wilson, 1992), especially where both partners listen, learn, negotiate and change (Andrews, 2001; Seidel & Eppel, 2001). Young people are able to comprehend, retain and transfer more information and skills, and they are more motivated to participate in collaborative learning when they experience artists and teachers working together (Burnaford, Aprill & Weiss, 2001). In teacher education, collaboration with artists has been successful for developing the arts expertise of beginning teachers (Andrews, 1995, 1999), and it has motivated them to teach the arts in their own classrooms (Andrews, 1997, 2006). In professional development, the most effective means of developing classroom teacher expertise and confidence in the arts is through hands-on activities guided by professional artists (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Naples, 2001; Patteson, 2002; Upitis, Smithrim & Soren, 1999).

Arts partnerships contribute expertise, insights and funds not available in schools (Irwin & Kindler, 1997; Upitis, Smithrim & Soren, 1999). Artist-teacher collaboration also changes attitudes in both schools and arts organizations about working with other organizations (Bailey, 1998). Successful collaboration develops mutual respect for each partner's values, goals and organizational culture (ARTS, Inc. & Performing Tree, 2000). Partnerships enable organizations to pool resources and ideas, share workloads, expand funding bases, gain political clout, and strengthen professional development opportunities for both teachers and artists (Arts Education Partnership, 2001).

The integrated arts is a teaching strategy for elementary classroom instruction which is based on the notion of learning through the arts (Freedman, 1989; Gallas, 1994). With this approach, the arts are employed as a vehicle for promoting learning across the school curriculum (Berghoff, Borgaman & Parr, 2003; Lee, 1993; Wilson, 1994). For example, learning about the fur trade by singing a Voyageur song (music), imitating the rhythmic movement of rowing a canoe (dance), examining the lyrics of the song (drama), and/or creating a life-size cardboard canoe (visual arts) can be employed to help students understand the history of transporting furs and of its importance to the early economic development of the country. The

integrated arts strategy has been introduced into the school curriculum to improve learning in non-arts subjects (Amber & Strong, 1981), improve educational outcomes (Allison, 1978), develop student potential (Carter & Adams, 1978), promote literacy (O'Brien, 1977), improve the quality of life (Kristen, 1983), and foster the transition of students from elementary to high school (McVey & Wilson, 1992). However, a major problem with integration is that progress tends to be promoted in one discipline at the expense of another, both at curricular (Brophy & Alleman, 1991) and administrative (Nanaimo School District, 1988) levels. Integrating the arts disciplines often reduces the amount of time in the curriculum to each subject area (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1992). Further, teaching a subject such as music or dance only through integration may deliver a message to students that the discipline has little merit on its own (Greater Metropolitan Toronto Music Coordinators' Association, 1994).

The integrated arts strategy focuses on themes and ideas rather than concepts and principles. This is advantageous to classroom teachers in an elementary setting where theme-based curricula is the norm but it is problematic if they do not have an arts background. Teachers require core skills in each of the arts disciplines – dance, drama, music and visual arts - to successfully use an integrated arts strategy (Best, 1995; Kindler, 1987): generic instructional skills are simply not sufficient (Clark, 1995; Conway, Hibbard, Albert & Hourigan, 2005). For example, to execute the lesson about the fur trade in the previous paragraph, a teacher requires basic skills in teaching singing, creative movement, story-telling, and arts and crafts. Further, integrative activities should support the learning goals of each of the arts disciplines (Brophy & Alleman, 1991); that is, students should also learn about the processes involved in singing, creating artistic movements, interpreting lyrics, and making three-dimensional objects. Research has demonstrated that collaboration with professional artists is an effective means for developing the arts expertise that teachers require (Harland, Lord, Stott, Kinder, Lamont & Ashworth, 2005; Upitis, Smithrim & Soren, 1999; Wahlstrom, 2003), and such collaboration encourages teachers to undertake arts instruction in their own classrooms (Ingram & Riedel, 2003; Smithrim & Upitis, 2001). This author found this also to be the case with the integrated arts, both in teacher education (Andrews, 1995, 1999) and in the field (1997, 2006). Consequently, the partnership program examined in this study focused on teacher learning with artists of both learning in the arts (i.e., core elements of the arts disciplines) and learning through the arts (i.e., how to integrate the arts across the school curriculum).

Methodology: Integrated Inquiry

Phase 1 of the Odyssey Project, outlined herein, focused on a description of those classroom dimensions of a partnership program that foster teacher learning in the arts, and Phase 2, reported elsewhere, explored teachers' perspectives on their professional development experience (Andrews, 2008a). The former represents *insider research* as the data was

collected by the course director, and analyzed and interpreted in collaboration with the principal investigator, and the latter represents *external research* as the data was collected by a researcher not directly involved in the program (Brannick & Cohan, 2007). Insider research enables a researcher to generate contextually embedded knowledge that emerges from experience (Evered & Louis, 1981). Through a reflexive research process, knowledge about the context of teacher learning in the arts can be transformed into theoretical knowledge. Brannick and Cohan (2007) explain:

As researchers, through a process of reflexive awareness, we are able to articulate tacit knowledge that has become deeply segmented because of socialization in an organizational system and reframe it as theoretical knowledge, and because we are close to something or know it well, we can research it. (p. 60)

Many teachers have pre-conceived notions of the arts as discrete disciplines – dance, drama, music and visual arts – within the school curriculum. In professional development courses, they seek concrete help in implementing the challenging provincial guidelines in the arts. As the course director noted:

They [teachers] want a grab bag of teachable lessons that they can implement without their own thought and reflection. This course does not directly satisfy those perceived needs. Instead, it provides experiences in creativity and aesthetic experience that invite them to think deeply about the meaning of such experiences on themselves, and then by reflection, on the lives of their students.²

Integrated Inquiry (Andrews, 1993, 2008b), a mixed method, was employed to examine relationships among data from multiple qualitative sources.³ Themes from reflective journals, classroom observations and video sessions were identified, combined and transformed to obtain an understanding of how classroom instruction featuring professional artists impacted teacher learning (refer to Figure 1). A reflexive-interpretive process was used to analyze and interpret the data (Holland, 1999). The focus was on reading the meaningful symbolic interactions in the participants' body language (video sessions), creative activities (observations), and writing (reflective journals). This process involved four stages:⁴ i) content analysis of each data source to generate themes; ii) meta-analysis of the themes to identify connections among them and give new meaning to the data; iii) consultation with the course director to refine the thematic connections; and iv) debriefing with the participants to validate

² E-mail communication of Tuesday, April 29, 2008 with the course director.

³ The author has employed Integrated Inquiry in previous studies. (Andrews, 2002, 2005 & 2006)

⁴ NVivo was the qualitative software program used in this inquiry to organize the data.

the findings. Combining and transforming of multiple data sources is supported by the research community as a means of strengthening findings and obtaining in-depth understandings (Creswell, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Rossman & Wilson, 1985).

Initially, twenty-one teachers (twenty women, one man) registered from across Eastern Ontario, representing both elementary and secondary panels. For a variety of personal reasons, three women eventually chose not to pursue the program. All remaining eighteen engaged in the journal writing and video sessions, and were observed in classroom activities. This number is appropriate for a study employing multiple qualitative data sources (Moustakas, 1994).

Discussion of Multiple Themes

Journal Writing

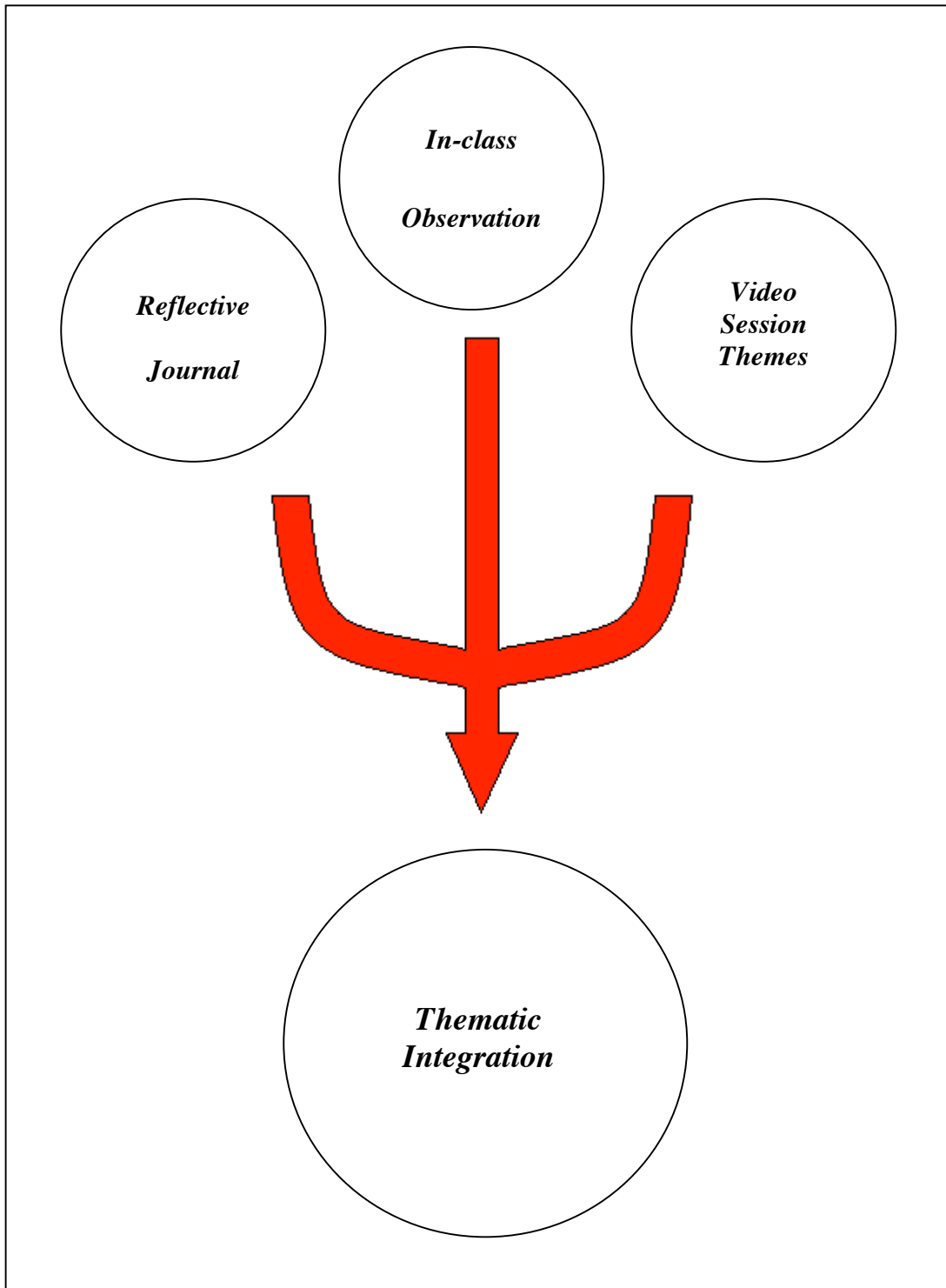
The reflective comments provided in the teachers' journals revealed substantive involvement by the candidates in the course. They were all profoundly affected by the intensity of the animated sessions of the artists, particularly those in dance and drama. The session in visual arts creation was the most relaxed component of the program, and the one in which in-depth artistic experience occurred most naturally. The musical creativity session contained the most inherent sense of celebration, and it provided a natural fusion of all of the arts (Figure 1).

The comparison of reflections after one week with those at the end revealed significant differences in perception and insight. A dominant theme after the first week was the exploration of the nature of creativity; that is, of the relationship between creator and that being created: "We didn't know what the results of our creations would be. The masks took on lives of their own: my mask became me."

Many participants asked questions that they hoped would be answered by the end of the course; for example, "Where is the line between structure and freedom in encouraging creative work?" Others commented on the nourishment of play: "Doing the choreographed sequence with the others was hilarious - I felt like a kid again." Some made comments on how the experiences affected their perception: "The reality of time can be so different than our perception of time."

An often-cited theme was the relationship between thought and feeling: "You can appreciate intellectually to a certain extent. An emotional connection to experience gives deeper meaning, making the learning much richer and more thorough." Early journal entries revealed an emerging trust and a growing sense of community. As the course progressed, more

Figure 1: Integrated Inquiry



teachers commented on this dimension of the program among the artists, themselves, and the course director. For example:

Taking this course has become an act of faith with me. I don't know how I will use it in my profession but I need to take it in order to enrich a part of myself. I am hoping it will make me stronger in all the roles I play.

Some candidates explored the meaning of the notion of integrated arts as a unified domain.

Are not the categories of dance, drama, music and visual arts artificial? Are the categories only used to discuss creativity? Are they not simply all languages spoken by the inner self, the soul, the child, the emotions?

By the end of the course, participants were making more complete reflections that indicated a deepening awareness of the significance of the arts to individual learning. For example:

Integrating the arts is providing multiple layers of symbolic texture to a set of ideas, concepts, phenomena or feelings. Each specific arts exploration adds meaning and depth to the content. The arts, so integrated, enrich all our thoughts and feelings about the essence of life itself.

Observations

Observations by the course director indicated an increased sense of group respect and awareness that increased substantially during the summer program. Teachers grew progressively more comfortable with one another and were increasingly prepared to take personal risks with their colleagues. One of the teachers highlighted this development in her journal:

We all spoke of being unable to get to sleep Tuesday or Wednesday due to the fact that the rhythms were coursing through us: it was as though something deeper than ourselves had been awakened with a life of its own, seeking integration with all of us

In general, teachers appeared to be intrinsically motivated in coming to the National Gallery and the National Arts Centre for the program. They felt complimented that the staff of both these institutions made them feel welcome, and that the artists were willing to share their expertise in a proactive and positive manner. Their reactions to the course environment were not inconsequential. Working together with artists in these settings made the quality of the

experience unique and reinforced the significance of the arts to professional practice. As one teacher noted in her journal writing:

Perhaps the connection between the arts and education is closer than at first look. If education is partly about the transmission of society's values, from one generation to the next, then the arts are central. The arts represent what those values are. The arts are our culture. Education is the medium by which we transmit the arts from one generation to the next.

Videotaped Sessions

The video sessions indicated increased group interaction, respect among participants, and mutual support throughout the program. Gradually, the teachers' personal practice involved more intense engagement, and their commitment focused on the activity at hand. On the first day of taping, teachers were observed remaining several feet from each other with little informal vocal interaction. By the third day, there was much evidence of them working in pairs and groups of four, frequently within the proximity of a foot from each other. Their informal vocal interaction appeared to be frequently spontaneous and increasingly reflected private emotional reactions to the activities. Teachers were often seen and heard helping each other. The course director commented:

During the first week, candidates appeared to increasingly work with more concentration, exhibiting fewer expressions of giggling, and demonstrating greater individual attention to assigned tasks. Involvement in the activity at hand became more focused. By the end of the first week, the level of commitment and respect within the group had increased noticeably.

The personal practice of the teachers intensified as the course unfolded. They encouraged and supported each other during the artistic exercises and lesson scenarios. In the debriefing sessions, the teachers gradually opened up and discussed their concerns about teaching the arts. They gradually came to understand and appreciate different views of the arts in education, such as discipline-based, multi-cultural arts, and integrated arts. The course director commented on this development:

As the second week progressed, there was increasing evidence of mutual support for each other. On individual projects, teachers were observed to be informally helpful to others in exploring movement sequences and in vocal expression exercises. In reflective discussions, they were emotionally open and spontaneously acknowledged other points of view. Further, they demonstrated an understanding of different perspectives.

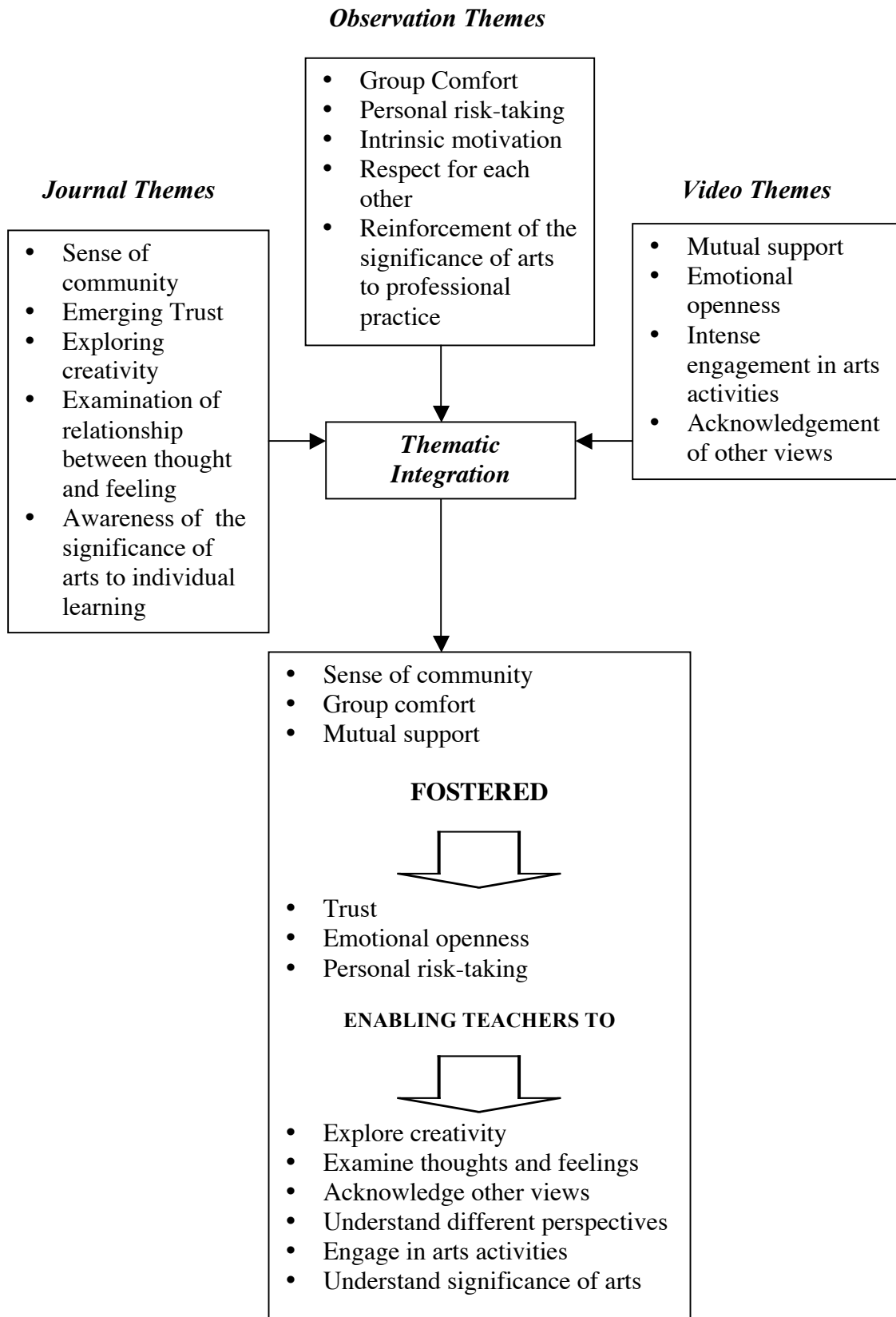
Integration of Multiple Themes

In summary, the journals provided evidence of multiple explorations of creativity, an examination of the relationship between thought and feeling, an emerging trust developing among the participants, a growing sense of community, and an increased awareness by the participants of the significance of the arts to individual learning. The observations revealed evidence of personal risk-taking, group comfort, respect for each other, intrinsic motivation, and reinforcement of the significance of the arts to professional practice. The video sessions indicated intense engagement in arts activities, mutual support, emotional openness, acknowledgement of other views, and understanding of different perspectives. All three data sources provided evidence of the importance of the classroom culture for promoting the teachers' personal arts learning. A meta-analysis of these themes was undertaken to identify connections, develop inter-relationships among them, and give new meaning to the data. The course director was consulted to refine these connections. Integration of the themes indicated that it was the *sense of community, group comfort and mutual support* which fostered *trust, emotional openness and personal risk-taking*. These aspects of the program were key to enabling the participants to *explore their own creativity, examine their thoughts and feelings, acknowledge other views, understand different perspectives, and engage successfully in artistic activities*. Further, they developed an understanding of the *significance of the arts* to individual learning and to professional practice (refer to Thematic Integration in Figure 2). The participants were consulted to validate these findings.

Implications for Professional Development

This study found that the arts partnership provided a mutually-supportive environment for the participants which enabled them to trust each other, be emotionally responsive to classmates, and take personal risks in learning - qualities which promote effective arts learning in classroom settings (Eisner, 1994; Gardner, 1990). It was the exploration of personal creativity, the discussion of artistic experiences, and the reflections on personal learning that increased the participants' skills, confidence, and awareness of the significance of the arts for learning. All of these are essential for effective arts instruction in schools (Hord et al., 1998; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003). This study reinforces previous research that demonstrates the effectiveness of artist-teacher collaboration in professional development for fostering teacher learning in the arts (Andrews, 1995, 1999; Harland et al., 2005; Smithrim & Upitis, 2001; Wahlstrom, 2003). The findings also provide direction for the design and delivery of the arts in professional development programs. First and foremost, the video sessions indicated that a positive and supportive classroom culture is key to enabling teachers to develop their artistic expertise. Second, the classroom observations indicated that a strong sense of "groupness" fosters risk-taking and creative exploration that are essential for successful engagement in artistic endeavours, and for personal growth and development. Finally, the reflective journals

Figure 2: Thematic Integration



illustrated that collaboration with artists in experiential activities stimulates creativity, fosters in-depth learning, and provides opportunities for both personal enrichment and enhancement of the curriculum.

Findings from the integration of themes indicate that an emerging group culture within the class, characterized by a sense of community, comfort and mutual support, fosters trust, emotional openness and personal risk-taking. These dimensions of the program enabled teachers to explore their own creativity, examine their thoughts and feelings, acknowledge each other's views, understand different perspectives, and engage successfully in artistic activities. This thematic integration suggest that the teachers were transformed as practitioners through participation in the partnership program. Three developmental stages indicative of transformation, as outlined by Mezirow (1991, 2000), emerged in their development: i) they were initially tentative in their approach to artistic activities (disorientation); ii) as a group culture emerged, they were willing to explore their own creativity and examine their thoughts and feelings (reflective experimentation); and iii) through artistic production, class discussion and personal reflection, they experienced an increase in confidence and awareness of the possibilities for teaching the arts (sense of achievement). After passing through these three stages, the teachers believed that they could successfully deliver the arts curriculum in their schools (Merriam & Clark, 1993).

This study also reinforces previous research that indicates that engagement in collaborative creative experiences in a peer-supported environment promotes teacher self-efficacy, a valuing of arts experiences, and a willingness to engage their own students in arts experiences (Wiggins, Wiggins & Ruthmann, 2004). It is the reflexive blending of discipline-based expertise with integrative teaching strategies within professional development that encourages classroom teachers to teach the arts in their own classrooms (Andrews, 1997, 2006; Patteson, 2002). In contrast, learning the arts disciplines without reference to the curriculum or teaching the integrated arts without understanding the core elements of the arts has been unsuccessful in fostering teacher learning (Best, 1995; Dorn & Jones, 1988; Kindler, 1987). For this reason, the profession needs to promote learning in and through the arts reflexively to meet curricular expectations. In this way, the arts disciplines enrich learning across the curriculum, and integrative activities foster learning in each of the disciplines. Collaboration with artists through a professional development partnership between a faculty of education and cultural institutions offers the possibility of achieving this goal.

Unfortunately, the action research component of the course proved to be problematic. The two-week duration and intensity of the Integrated Arts course did not provide sufficient time for the participants to grasp the complexities of conducting applied research. During the following academic year when the teachers implemented their projects, the University lacked the resources to provide adequate research expertise so that they experienced uncertainty and

frustration. Moreover, they did not have ready access to their colleagues from the summer session nor the ongoing support of a group culture. The teachers also experienced difficulty finding the time in their schedules and acquiring the resources to undertake such a project. In many cases, the school administration and other staff members were not always amenable to what they perceived as an additional workload. It became apparent that the inclusion of an action research project within a professional development framework requires training in the methodology, a liaison with the participating schools boards, ongoing research support by university personnel, and a debriefing of the participants to bring the course to closure. Consequently, the action research project was judged by the teaching staff and administration to be no longer feasible within the course structure of the Integrated Arts summer partnership program.

Coda

This first phase of The Odyssey Project focused on a description of those factors that foster teacher learning in the arts. The findings will be useful to those faculties of education developing similar teacher development programs involving artist participation. Further inquiry needs to be undertaken to determine best practices for artist participation in professional development for teachers and how this involvement affects educational practice. Also, the transformative dimension of professional development with practising artists, an emergent finding in this study, offers fertile ground for future research. Such knowledge would enable faculties of education to structure partnership courses to more effectively enhance teachers' arts learning and instructional expertise in the arts. It is important that such research be conducted. Teachers are expected to implement the arts in their classrooms with very limited training or pre-requisite expertise. With effective professional development programs, teachers will develop the artistic and instructional expertise to successfully teach the arts, and the arts in schools will not be placed in jeopardy.

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