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# LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Marie M. Adair, Joanne E. Kerekes, Dr. Penelope E. Lattimer, Dr. Adele T. Macula & Dr. Mary M. Reece



Designing for Wonder, Curiosity, and  
Collaboration: At the Intersection of the Arts  
with Other Academic Standards

Sunday Dec 8 at 1pm et



NJ Arts Think Tank  
Legacy Authors Interview

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## Designing for Wonder, Curiosity, and Collaboration: At the Intersection of the Arts with Other Academic Standards

Marie M. Adair, Executive Director Emerita of NJ ASCD, Joanne E. Kerekes, Consultant for Stronge and Associates, Dr. Penelope E. Lattimer, Arts Consultant and former New Jersey State Assistant Commissioner of Education, Dr. Adele T. Macula, Director of Curriculum and Instruction for School Leadership Programs at the Foundation for Educational Administration (New Jersey), and Dr. Mary M. Reece, Director of Special Projects at the Foundation for Educational Administration (New Jersey).

As career educators, we always knew to nurture the success of the whole child...

- that there would be a more exciting way to ignite the spirit of curiosity in learners through multi-sensory experiences.
- that live theatre does this best!
- that our goals would include creating programs rich with multicultural content to encourage learners to care about the stories, the characters, their history, and relatable contemporary issues.
- that there would be an emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL) with themes addressing inclusion, collaboration, responsibility, and concern for others.



- that our challenge would be to design programs beyond the textbook that develop passionate, interested learners whose prior knowledge of theatre arts was primarily through television and computer programs.
- that our intention would be to present a menu of programs anchored to a well-articulated unit and lesson template.

## The Pause

Taking time to pause and reflect on what we know is rare anywhere in our lives but particularly in education where the pace is quick, curricular changes occur cyclically, and resources are marketed with intensity. Thoughtful pausing, an intermission in which to breathe and think, is one of the hardest but healthiest things an organization can do. In Spring 2020, born of necessity at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the pause button was pushed in New Jersey on several mandates—and in the hiatus that followed, there was opportunity for organizations to rethink and reimagine: What should we keep? What should we do differently? What can we do more effectively and efficiently?

According to Thomas L. Friedman, in his New York Times editorial (Oct. 20, 2020) *After the Pandemic, a Revolution in Education and Work Awaits*, he urges us “to fasten our seatbelts” as the era of change will be profound emphasizing that “the most critical role for K-12 educators, therefore, will be to equip young people with the curiosity and passion to be lifelong learners who feel ownership over their education.”

Among the educational organizations that took advantage of this time to reset, was a theatre nestled in central New Jersey. Collaborative work took place between the theatre and the schools which enriched and enhanced the core curriculum. However, there was increasing awareness that levers of change were in motion (a shifting culture and new educational mandates, findings, and trends) and a growing recognition that the program offerings needed to more closely address the needs and interests of teachers and students.

## The Research

The Education Committee of the Board of Trustees was concerned that the education program offerings had remained static for too long. The Board commissioned a research-based study to be done by Rutgers University Graduate School of Education’s Center for Effective School Practices, assessing the offerings. The report’s findings underscored alignment with the view of the Board, specifically, that there was a need to redefine the program and incorporate the latest best practices in teaching and learning, ongoing professional learning, classroom pedagogy, while embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The Board boldly took action to pause for the purpose of re-imagining and re-designing a new education department to include new leadership and programming.



## The Think Tank

The Board’s decision gave way to the convening of a Think Tank, comprised of a select group of accomplished education and arts leaders, charged to:

- conceptualize the “why” and “what” of arts integration.
- help re-imagine a new Education Department with a new vision and clarity of purpose.
- offer experience in designing programs and professional learning opportunities.

Fourteen prominent leaders accepted the invitation and met several times to kickstart the transformation. The Board President along with the Education Committee Chairperson, both career education leaders, served as co-chairs facilitating the Think Tank. Participants included former Assistant Superintendents of school districts, an arts professional learning specialist, a former principal, faculty and researchers from universities, professional teaching artists, community outreach specialists, and a Board Member.

A first meeting occurred just five weeks after “the pause” was approved by the Board. The Think Tank was tasked with envisioning new education programs to set priority on teacher professional learning and student learning experiences. Using ever-changing interdisciplinary themes, the newly designed programs needed to align academic work with theatre arts teaching methods. These newly designed programs needed to emphasize social emotional learning competencies and prioritize the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion. At this point, the group agreed that theatre arts integration had to be the primary driver to broaden and uplift culturally responsive learning experiences for all.

## A New Way of Knowing: Authentic Experiences

In time, themes began to emerge: Sustainability. Cultural humility. Shared ties of mutuality. Diversity. Interpersonal relationships. Inclusion. Benevolence. Mistake-making and safe spaces. Immersive experiences. Arts. Points of entry and readiness. Knowing. Choice. Curiosity. Perspectives. Identity. Giving voice to stories. Equity.



These themes launched us into a period of reimagining and retooling, and an “artistic way of knowing” formed. Through this lens, we were able to foresee the next generation of American Theatre—the voices, makers, players, and supporters. We identified authentic experiences that would take students beyond the text of a play and immerse them in the community of live, contemporary theater—what was happening on stage, backstage, and in the house itself. Through multimedia reading, viewing, and listening experiences, we envisioned that students would study the rich dramaturgy that provides actors and directors with context for a play. Talkbacks with the playwright and director would give students the opportunity to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with greatness. Students would have meaningful reasons to respond in writing and voice opinion. We visualized training students’ ears to acclimate to new dialects and languages, nudging and nurturing them to lean into new works of contemporary playwrights.

A four-person team of educators and artists began to meet to move these visualizations into purposeful action. Our mission was to co-design a replicable and flexible theatre arts integration template that activated both arts and non-arts-standards with thoughtful consideration of assessment. As we worked together, we developed a draft that would gel the State mandates with the best practices in the arts. To do this, we leveraged the resources that were available. We anchored to the models provided in the NJ’s Arts Integration Think and Do Workbook (2018, 2020), and we wove in the threads that are embedded in the NJ Student Learning Standards: Career Readiness, Life Literacies, and Key Skills (2020) and themes from the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning’s (2009) Framework for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills including the social and cross-cultural skills associated with equity, diversity, and inclusion. We also referenced the NJ Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies (2017) and the big ideas found in The Arts Education and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Framework (2020) from the NJ Center for Arts Education and Social-Emotional Learning Network. Core to the project were the NJ Student Learning Standards in Literacy/Language Arts, Social Studies, and the Arts. We identified the student audience as middle and high school learners, and we made direct linkages to the theatre’s main stage seasonal programming.

## A Template as Exemplar

What emerged was a collaborative “template as exemplar” demonstrating refinement, style, and simplicity. At its base are the standards and literacies. In its body are the connections between on-stage, back-stage, and the audience. The focus on older students is maintained throughout, and the big ideas that emerged from the Think Tank are included as undercurrents.

**Integrated Arts Unit Planning Template**

<p><b>Unit Focus:</b></p> <p>UNIT DESCRIPTION (A brief, 2-3 sentence or less, description. Make another tab sheet if about this part.)</p> <hr/> <p>TARGETED GRADE LEVELS: _____ UNIT PLAN (number and type of lessons)</p> <hr/> <p><b>LIFE &amp; TECH LITERACIES</b> (results of aligned standards from that page)</p> <p><b>21ST CENTURY THEMES &amp; SKILLS</b> (results from that page)</p> <hr/> <p><b>SEL SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES</b> (results from that page)</p> <p><b>ART PROCESS/FORM/SKILL/SPECIAL PERFORMANCE ARTS</b> (results from that page)</p> <hr/> <p><b>RELEVANT STANDARDS</b> (This tab links to other tabs)</p> <p><b>STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS (ENGL) - (11-12)</b></p> <p><b>MAIN STAGE:</b> _____</p> <p><b>BACKSTAGE:</b> _____</p>	<p><b>INTEGRATED OBJECTIVES</b> (One objective for integration per lesson objective for a unit. Link to activities in the student work tab. You can link to activities and finally, students. We are keeping track of what we learned.)</p> <p><b>MAIN STAGE</b></p> <p><b>BACKSTAGE</b></p> <p><b>ACTIVITIES</b></p> <p><b>1. TASK</b></p> <p><b>LEVEL OF THINKING</b></p> <p>FORMAT: _____</p> <p>DURATION: _____</p> <p><b>KEY VOCABULARY:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS:</b> _____</p> <p><b>FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:</b> _____</p> <p><b>DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INNOVATION FOR VIRTUAL DELIVERY:</b> _____</p> <p><b>2. TASK</b></p> <p><b>LEVEL OF THINKING</b></p> <p>FORMAT: _____</p> <p>DURATION: _____</p> <p><b>KEY VOCABULARY:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS:</b> _____</p> <p><b>FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:</b> _____</p> <p><b>DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INNOVATION FOR VIRTUAL DELIVERY:</b> _____</p>	<p><b>3. LESSON:</b></p> <p><b>TASKS:</b> _____</p> <p><b>FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:</b> _____</p> <p><b>DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INNOVATION FOR VIRTUAL DELIVERY:</b> _____</p> <p><b>LEVEL OF THINKING</b></p> <p>FORMAT: _____</p> <p>DURATION: _____</p> <p><b>KEY VOCABULARY:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS:</b> _____</p> <p><b>INTEGRATED SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT TASK</b> (Connect back to the lesson and use these standards. Use this as a guide to create a summative task to assess student integration and learning between the content areas.)</p> <p><b>CLOSING QUESTION</b> (to create reflection and real world connections)</p> <p><b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b> (input is needed by the teacher in order to reach all children)</p> <p><b>OTHER INNOVATIVE TEACHER NOTES</b> (This tab will give the full 10 tabs to use.)</p>
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The template comes with a richness of engaging, immersive activities based on the dramaturgy which drives the play and an array of effective alternative instructional strategies for meeting the needs of different learners. There is an appendix with related resources such as graphic organizers and a shared drive with multimedia materials including a video that takes students into live theatre etiquette and touches upon the themes of universality, culturally responsive reactions, and audience as participants and their effect on the energy in a theatre. There is also a response to backstage decisions such as casting and stage directions.

### During the pause, we learned that...

- transformative work can occur in a short timeframe.
- building upon the ongoing work of colleagues manifested in the creation of a new exemplar.
- accomplished and like-minded education and arts leaders came together, and work flowed quickly.
- that “an artistic way of knowing” shifted our view of arts integration.
- that immersive arts experiences are “game-changers” resulting in a new, contemporary program design with exciting and enriching educational offerings.
- that the work would be ongoing and ever-changing as we grapple with sustainability.

Resulting from this innovative experience in curriculum, collaboration, and leadership:

We now know that...

- providing a teaching and learning template as an exemplar gives support and illustrates how to integrate Theatre Arts with English Language Arts and other academic disciplines.
- a Humanities approach to curriculum extends, relates, and personalizes learning beyond the textbook.
- there is beauty and essence in theatre which becomes the artistic lens a viewer uses to connect with the characters, their thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- an integrated arts model holds the best promise to gain new, insightful perspectives causing individuals to change and real growth to occur.
- integrating the arts nurtures the success of the whole child and epitomizes the best of The Humanities!



- this integrated arts model supports global arts efforts including the U.S. Department of Education's Raise the Bar: Lead the World (2024) call to action “promoting academic excellence and wellness for every learner” and by “increasing access to strong arts education” and “expanding access enrichment programs”.

In summary, this project/curriculum experience exemplifies the richness of teaching and learning that is created at the intersection of theatre arts and academic standards inspiring the minds and hearts of both instructors and students!

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