

# Literacy, Music, and Visual Arts Connect!

*"Wisdom is sometimes defined as the ability to make connections."*

Mary Kuzniar, *Teaching Music*

■ by Carolyn Lewis and Jane Wamsley

Photos: Gordon Truffen



Jeffrey Wilhelm, his book *Reading is Seeing*, quotes renowned arts educator Elliot Eisner: "Those who cannot imagine cannot read." Wilhelm expands on Eisner's statement; "Although reading can lead to abstract thought, that thought depends at its base on concrete, highly visualized experiences of the individual reader. All thinking proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, from the visible to the invisible."\*

Literacy goals continue to be a focus in our schools. When developing music skills and knowledge through listening, performing and creating activities, music programs support the literacy goals in reading, writing and oral language. Many music teachers faithfully build word walls, use before/during/after literacy strategies, have students develop comprehension skills while reading lyrics, write reflections in journals – all supporting and developing students' literacy skills.

We have found that bringing together music, poetry, and visual arts was a great way to engage our students meaningfully.

We wanted to inspire our students to create deep, rich, expressive works in visual arts, music, and poetry! That's just what happened through our "Picture, Poetry, and Piano" project.

The learning experiences described in this article integrate music, visual arts, and language arts. Students are given the opportunity to use their knowledge of the elements of music, artistic design, and descriptive words to analyze art works of others. They then apply their learning and create their own pictures, poetry, and music. Each medium is connected to the others in a meaningful way.

The music curriculum states that students require many opportunities to create music, and to express ideas through other media. This rich, integrated, creative task highlights the overall curriculum expectations, specifying communication as a response to music in ways appropriate for each grade; for example, through language, visual arts, drama, and creative movement.

This project can be used to assess the areas of Knowledge, Thinking Skills, Application, and Communication, in all three of the integrated subjects used in this project. Although this project has been used with Grades 4 and 5, it has the potential to serve as a model for nearly every grade.

We have taught this integrated project in music classes and have also integrated it with other language and art teachers. Both experiences were successful, so either situation would work in your school.

The music specialist prepared students for the integrated experience. Prior knowledge and experience using the elements of music and of design, reading expressively, and writing poetry are important to the success of the tasks. We used the art work of Canadian artist Ted Harrison, because our children had studied his work; however, you may use any artist.

Carolyn Lewis and Jane Wamsley have teamed up to share the music instruction at Alexander's Public School, Halton District School Board.

We were saddened to hear of Lister Sinclair's recent death, and feel so fortunate to have worked on this wonderful project with him!

## Exploring art, poetry, and music

Our students attended a multimedia concert where Ted Harrison's vibrant paintings were projected on a screen while CBC broadcaster Lister Sinclair read poems full of wonderful images and humour. Concert pianist Gloria Saarinen responded with piano pieces she had selected. All of the individual works were inspired by our North American landscapes. We were ALL inspired!

### Getting started

Examine and discuss selected pieces of art work. The book *North America in Picture, Poetry and Piano* by Ted Harrison, Gloria Saarinen, and Lister Sinclair is a good primary resource; however, other art work, poetry, and music could be used successfully.

Alternatively, explore and discuss artwork by Ted Harrison from his picture book, *O Canada*.

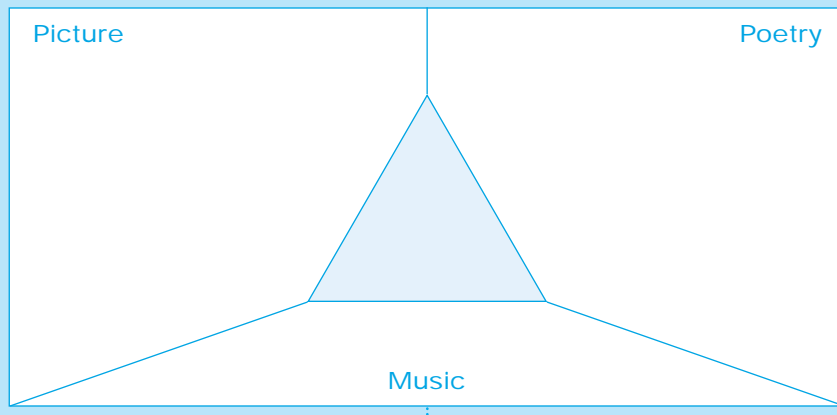
Transfer placemat organizer (see diagram) onto large sheets of chart paper and place five or six on the floor around the room.

Divide students into small groups of four or five and assign each group one of the placemat organizers.

Begin by examining one of the paintings, having each student consider the three key questions: What do you SEE? What do you HEAR? What do you FEEL?

Each student records responses on the organizer in the appropriate section (use sticky notes and/or markers); e.g. "jagged, thick lines; bold colours; circular shapes."

**KEY QUESTIONS:** *What do you see?*  
*What do you hear?*  
*What do you feel?*



After students have been given some time to record their ideas, share answers as a large group. Discuss as a class in order to find support for decisions made. For example: "I chose the word crashing because of the falling water and rolling waves."

As a class, make connections to the elements: "What makes water look as if it is falling? – straight or curved lines, colour, texture..." Include in your discussion, the elements of design – the way Ted Harrison uses lines, shape, colour, and texture.

Repeat the same process after listening to the piano selection from the CD (or music you have chosen to reflect art work). While listening and recording ideas in the piano/music section of the organizer, it is important to continue to refer to the key questions: What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? Repeat the same process for a final time by reading and examining the poetry.

Discuss the connections that can be made among all three (picture, poetry and music) by identifying words that are repeated or similar: for example, *loud*, *bold*, *crashing*. Put these common words in the centre triangle. Discuss how the mood is expressed in words, art, and music.

Next the students repeat the same brainstorming process individually, each completing an organizer on his or her own, responding to a new art work, a new piece of poetry, and a new piece of music.

Encourage students to write the words that describe their initial responses to what they see and hear, then have them identify words that are common to all three areas of the organizer, which they write in the middle of the organizer.

In pairs, students share the connections they can see, hear, and feel among the pictures, the poetry and the music. Discuss these connections with the large group.

\* Wilhelm 2004, p.14. Quoted in *Me Read? No Way!* Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2004. Available on the website [www.gov.on.ca/education](http://www.gov.on.ca/education).

*Continues on page 23, after the insert*



example, they were encouraged to vary the pitch of the voices, add dynamics to their reading and playing, and consider whether the speech or music should be detached or smooth.

Students could use a variety of tuned (e.g., glockenspiels, xylophones, metallophones, etc.), non-tuned (maracas, woodblocks, sandblocks, etc.) and percussion instruments. A data projector, screen, and laptop computer were used for the visuals.

The fabulous success of the final performances – many in the audience were deeply touched by the students' work – validated the time and energy devoted to this creative and reflective process.

#### Assessment and evaluation

Students completed peer assessments during the performances by reflecting on the connections among the art forms.

- Did the group's music reflect the art work and poem? Why or why not?
- What elements of music did the group consider when creating the music?

Students reflected on the same questions for their own work as a self-assessment. Their reflections provided valuable evidence of their learning.

Evaluation of the compositions and performances for music included:

- Melody/Pitch – accurate pitches, flow of the melody
- Tone colour – instruments chosen reflect mood
- Expression – dynamics and tempo reflect mood.

#### Creating art, poetry, and music

Using the previous process as a model, students create their own art work, poetry, and music in small groups. For example, the art work could be created using oil pastels in the style of Ted Harrison; poetry in the form of free verse or rhyming couplets could be written using descriptive language; and music could be created using tuned/untuned percussion instruments, recorders, found sounds, piano, etc.

To inspire students to create meaningful art work, we asked them to visualize places in Canada that were special or meaningful to them: the Rocky Mountains, their cottage, or maybe part of a hiking trail. They used oil pastels to create their own images.

Students wrote the poetry individually, in pairs or sometimes as a group. They were inspired by the art work.

Finally, the students created music in response to the art work and poetry.

Some used piano music enhanced by other untuned percussion instruments; some created an original soundscape; some chose music from a CD. Students explained how the elements of music were used to convey meaning.

If visual arts, language arts, and music teachers all collaborate with students on this project, the overall unit would take approximately 3-4 weeks.

#### The performance

The process toward the culminating performances required time for brainstorming, creating, rehearsing, editing, and polishing. How much time?

For the performance, each piece of student art work was digitally photographed and projected onto a screen. Students read their poems expressively (solo/duet/small group) and performed the music. We encouraged them to plan their spoken and instrumental performances to use the elements of music effectively; for

Evaluation for reflections included:

- Critical analysis – accurate description using music terminology.

This engaging project/assessment task resulted in rich learning experiences, as students:

- Used high level thinking skills when making connections among the art forms
- Applied their knowledge of the elements of design in visual art and the elements of music to create their exquisite integrated pieces
- Wrote poetry that was thought-provoking and descriptive
- Focused on critical thinking and creativity, which allowed them to express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas
- Learned to appreciate the artistic expressions of others
- Developed collaborative and problem solving skills
- Felt included and valued for the skills they brought to the project.

Some of our students were able to share their poetry, art work, and music with Lister Sinclair and Gloria Saarinen, performers at the OMEA Niagara Music Toolbox in October 2005. Lister, Gloria, and their manager Estelle Hamoline were thrilled with the level of student expression. We were proud of our students' outstanding creativity and performances.

An example of the results

The following is an example of Grade 5 students' art work and poetry (you'll have to imagine the stunning music that they created!)



### The Light of the Lighthouse

Here I am, Peggy's Cove, the end of the world,  
Nothing but ocean from here on  
And the unforgettable lighthouse mounted on the rocky shore,  
Sky piercer, eye blinder, the light of the lighthouse,  
Saving hundreds of sailors from a rocky grave.  
On a dark, stormy night the sailboat of a young fisherman looking for land  
approaches,  
As the waves crash and slam into the shoreline the wrath of the mighty  
Poseidon god of the seas,  
Sky piercer, eye blinder, the light of the lighthouse,  
The fisherman sees the light and backs away as to not slam into the rocks.  
The mighty waves hold him back, yet he survives to tell the tale,  
Sky piercer, eye blinder, the light of the lighthouse.

Art work: Juan Lopez, Chris Dinadis, Osman,  
Liam Hannon-Hupe, and Wade Bennett

Poetry: Juan Lopez

### Resources

- Ajmera, Maya and John D. Ivanko, Global Fund for Children. *To Be An Artist*. Watertown, Ma: Charlesbridge, 2000.
- Booth, David, ed. *Images of Nature-Canadian Poets and the Group of Seven*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1995.
- Students of George T. Cunningham Elementary School. *We Are All Related – Art and Quotations by Students*. Foreword by George Littlechild. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books, 2000.
- Harrison, Ted. *O Canada*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1992.
- Harrison, Ted, Gloria Saarinen, and Lister Sinclair. *North America in Picture, Poetry and Piano*. Oakville, On: Key Connections. [www.keyconnections.ca](http://www.keyconnections.ca). Contact Estelle Hamoline, 1332 Deerwood Trail, Oakville, ON L6M 2H4. 905-825-1475; [estelle@keyconnections.ca](mailto:estelle@keyconnections.ca).
- Heard, Georgia, ed. *Songs of Myself, An Anthology of Poems and Art*. New York: Mondo Publishing, 2000.
- Littlechild, George. *This Land is My Land*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1993
- Scott, Melanie, ed. *Artsmarts Handbook*. Ottawa, On: Canadian Conference of the Arts, 2003. Available on the CCA website: [ccarts.ca](http://ccarts.ca)

CONNECTING 1. Understand cultural, historical, and interdisciplinary connections. with dance. 1. Exemplify how dance is used by various groups for artistic expression within the local community. 2. Exemplify connections between dance and concepts in other curricular areas. MUSIC. MUSICAL LITERACY 1. Apply the elements of music and musical techniques in order to sing. and play music with accuracy and expression. 1. Apply elemental changes, including changes to dynamics, tempo, timbre, or texture, when singing or playing music. VISUAL LITERACY 1. Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively. 1. Use art vocabulary, including specific artistic terms. 2. Understand that artists use their art to express personal ideas. Teaching Visual Literacy: How to teach film, video games, picture storybooks and advertising in the classroom. If visual literacy is about decoding meaning from images of various kinds, we need to teach our students how to set about this intimidating task - just as we do when we teach them how to approach a written text. Regardless of the nature of the image, this process follows three general steps To inaugurate the website of the Visual Arts Circle we have invited Dr. Sylvia Karastathi of New York College, Athens, Greece who has a PhD and post-doctoral studies from the University of Cambridge, to write about the increasing important role of visual literacy in English language teaching. Few language teachers can claim that they never use still or moving images in their lessons; yet, this standard practice is rarely touched upon in teacher training curricula on the assumption the way to introduce images into lessons is self-evident. Media arts music. Theater. Visual art. Explore Plan Revise Express Embody Present Analyze Interpret Critique Synthesize Relate. Imagine Plan Organize Produce Construct Refine Create Innovate Contextualize Relate Convey Critique. Imagine Plan and Make Evaluate Refine Present Select Analyze Interpret Rehearse Refine Present Connect. Envision Conceptualize Develop Rehearse Select Prepare Share-Present Interpret Evaluate Empathize Interrelate Research. Perceive Relate Investigate Plan & Make Classify Create Explore Design Refine Reflect Analyze Interpret Elaborate Compare. The Music and Literacy Connection, 2nd Edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. The Arts has long been revered as an area of imaginative and investigative inquiry that facilitates deep and considered aesthetic understanding of an art form in order to create new artistic products. A vast majority of the literature regarding the Arts and literacy speaks to how engagement in the Arts makes students more literate, or how literacy skills (specifically reading and writing) can be further developed in Arts classrooms (Barton, 2013; Handerhan, 1993). However, Barton (2013) argues that teachers of the Arts tend to view literacy in two interconnecting ways: reading and writing in t