

Review: *A Symphony of Possibilities: A Handbook for Arts Integration in Secondary English Language Arts*

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A Symphony of Possibilities: A Handbook for Arts Integration in Secondary English Language Arts is an edited collection published by NCTE that explores how different modalities of art-making can be integrated into secondary English curriculum. Katherine J. Marco, a lecturer of Education within SUNY Buffalo State College, and Michelle Zoss, an associate professor of English Education at Georgia State University, are the editors and two authors of chapters. Both are former secondary English teachers with several journal publications on arts integration. Additionally, they were recently the co-chairs of NCTE’s Commission on Arts and Literacies (COAL), an organization that “collectively [aims] to shed light on the thoughtful and creative work that teachers and students are doing across the country as they bring the full sense of possibilities in arts-based pedagogies into their ELA classes” (Zoss & Marco, 2019a, p. xii). The other authors within the book are all members of the COAL or educational leaders passionate about arts integration. Each author provides compelling rationale for why English teachers should consider infusing art-making into their curriculum as well as examples of how arts-based methods influence real students’ learning, from middle school to postsecondary levels.

The book begins with Zoss and Marco articulating their reasons for creating this collection. Secondary English courses can focus on standardized practices, such as students writing five-paragraph essays “because they have to learn to jump through hoops” (Zoss & Marco, 2019a, p. xi). Drawing from the mission of the COAL, which is to “effect change in English language arts classrooms by advancing teaching, research, and theory in the three areas of the arts, multimodalities, and New Literacies in ways that situate this knowledge as essential components of literacy learning’ (NCTE Commission on Arts and Literacies, n.d.), the authors in this book seek to resist practices of standardization that force students to conform and silence their voices; thus, the authors offer strategies for arts integration that are pedagogically sound and promote individualized learning. The authors’ aim is “to show that, in the arts, there is possibility for secondary teachers and their students” (Zoss & Marco, 2019a, p. xii). Collectively, the authors within this handbook hold instructional and leadership roles from middle grades to higher education, with research interests that include a variety of artforms: music, poetry, drama, and visual arts. In their introduction, Zoss and Marco (2019a) invite all teachers “who seek to renew, revive, or create experiences that are alive with thinking and passion” to consider how the chapters within this book can help them “push back against the testing and standardization culture” (p. xi).

Zoss and Marco (2019a) tell readers that each book chapter “provides a tangible example of real teachers using real methods with real students” (p. xviii). Additionally, they seek to reveal how art-making can serve as methods for resisting the standardized culture of current educational systems. This handbook effectively showcases moments of active learning that resist traditional ways of knowing. The chapters’ subjects are evenly dispersed between different forms of art-making, with some sections moving from student experiences to moments of social awareness. In a chapter involving music, Duggan (2019) explains how musical adaptations help students “make sense of the

world and of their place in it” (p. 14). Within a following chapter, Goering and Matthews (2019) illustrate how music integration can contribute to students’ understanding of social justice practices through protest songwriting. Their curriculum began with the events surrounding the Kent State University Massacre, then examining protest songs. Although students created songs that were personally meaningful, the authors also required students to address “a targeted audience” so they could “socially engage with an issue important to them and do so while learning about song structure, technique, and approaches frequently used in protest songs” (Goering & Matthews, 2019, p. 20).

The visual arts chapters also move from expression to activism. White (2019) reveals ways visual responses can pair with any literature text, with examples that range from wire sculptures to sketches and useful rubrics (p. 113). She also provides suggestions for students who are less comfortable with art-making such as collage. Hartman et al. (2019) also examine artistic responses with students, defining this practice as “ the process by which readers create concrete representations of their transactions with a text through artistic means, including visual arts (e.g., drawing, sculpture, and painting), drama, and music” (p. 121). While also including a rubric (p. 137) for evaluating student work, Hartman et al. (2019) illustrate the impact that reflective activities can have on student learning. Zoss’s (2019) chapter moves into ways large-scale drawings contribute to the classroom community, facilitate discussion, and promote reflection. She also details how arts integration was a form of resisting the standardized practices imposed by administration, resulting in the loss of funding for art supplies the following year. This chapter is especially useful when considering the goals of this handbook as a tool to help other educators so they can advocate for themselves in a way that Zoss (2019) could not at the time. In the last chapter of the visual arts section, Gross (2019) illustrates how individual student work can be published within the classroom,

around the school, and outside of the school's interior to expand student's methods of expression and provide active roles within their school culture. The publication of student work was even supported by his principal. Gross (2019) also showcases how school expectations, such as a requirement to put vocabulary words on classroom walls, can turn into an expressive arts-based practice (p. 166).

The range of methods are useful for educators who are new to arts integration or well-versed in it, but interested in doing more; however, although student work is highlighted in many chapters, some chapters are focused on theory instead of curricular resources readers could directly use. Specific student examples are also missing from some chapters despite the intent being a handbook highlighting "real teachers using real methods with real students" (Zoss and Marco, 2019a, p. xviii). Some authors were workshop leaders instead of classroom teachers, which could have influenced the curriculum's effectiveness. Additionally, some authors drew from work with eighth grade or university students instead of secondary English students. Secondary English teacher readers might prefer more transparency of how the activities worked for students based on grade/ability levels and length of time for activities. Direct connections to secondary English learning standards would also be useful. Still, regardless of the students' ability levels and settings, readers will consider how the activities within this handbook could serve their individual students and courses. Modifications will occur and the authors encourage readers to do so.

Although there are some disparities between representations of authors/students and how the book is specifically branded as a resource for secondary English teachers, all of these authors are passionate about arts integration, the mission of the COAL, and providing students with impactful, enjoyable experiences. Zoss and Marco (2019a) are correct that testing and other standardized measures of student learning are ineffective in supporting students' diverse needs, and "[s]tudents

need the arts of fiction, poetry, drama, visual art, music, and dance to be welcomed and embraced in schools” (Zoss & Marco, 2019a, p. xvi). When recognizing the amount of authors who work within higher education in this book, it makes one consider how many secondary English teachers experienced moments of discouragement such as Zoss’s (2019) when attempting arts integration and seek a resource that invites them to make another attempt. At the end of the book, Zoss and Marco (2019b) refer to one of Zoss’s close friends who asked her when she would write something for English teachers to show their administrators in support of arts integration. This handbook answers that request, outlining the “radical vision” of the COAL and other advocates of arts integration where English courses could “focus on what students create. When the aim of a class lesson is creating something, students produce knowledge, embody their ideas, and examine their thinking” (Zoss & Marco, 2019b, p. 177).

This handbook holds many useful resources, from assignment prompts rubrics to samples of students’ work. But it is also an encouraging invitation from the authors to readers, asking them to consider possibilities, try new approaches, and resist standardized curricular practices that limit students’ voices and agency. When contemplating what is next for arts integration, Zoss and Marco (2019b) state that “[t]he future of arts integration needs to be one that embraces embodied, multimodal learning, with opportunities for expression and exploration for growth and development rather than for the sake of a grade or a test” (p. 179). This process calls for “hands-on, meaningful, and applicable professional development that places the arts at the center of instruction rather than at the fringes in extra credit projects” as well as “teachers sharing their successes” (p. 179). Perhaps this handbook will encourage enough secondary English teachers to try arts integration so that this topic becomes a series, featuring even more practicing classroom teachers and their students. Secondary English teachers do not need formal training in studio art practices for arts integration to

work for their classrooms; they just “need to have or foster a sense of openness, a willingness to be surprised” (Zoss & Marco, 2019b, p. 179). This handbook holds firsthand experiences of surprise and openness that will, hopefully, contribute to even more moments as readers adopt the authors’ strategies, visions, and approaches.

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