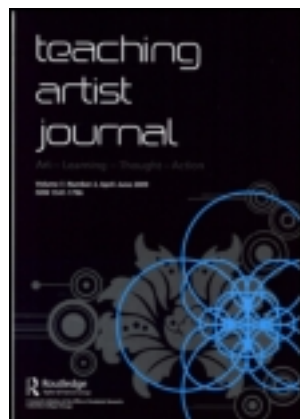


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### Miracle Moments: Tales of Arts Integration

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## ABSTRACT

An author/TA reflects on the transformative power of arts experience.

# Miracle Moments: Tales of Arts Integration

In the spring, my East Coast teaching artist colleagues and I travel to New York City for a day of “R and R.” During the school year and throughout the summer, we each work solo—locally and nationally—helping students and teachers integrate the arts into daily classroom instruction. During our annual outing we share memorable moments from the previous year. Each year the stories vary, but their theme remains the same: “Miracle Moments”—moments that changed students, teachers, and us. We listen, laugh, sigh, and cry over the mysterious power of the arts in education.

This year I am struggling with what story to share. Perhaps I will tell the story of my work in an arts-integrated elementary school in Arizona. I demonstrated how drama strengthens the reading comprehension skill inference. Teachers observed my work with students, and afterward we reflected on what we gleaned from the experience.

In our final reflection session at the end of four days, each teacher—from Gifted and Talented to Special Needs—registered amazement at the students’ ability to infer and the depth of their inferences through their drama work: “I never knew he had that in him!” or “How did you get *her* to respond?”

I asked them to think back on all the classes they observed and pick one class they felt created the most consistent characterizations and created dialogue that reflected the deepest inferences. Every teacher chose the same class—the multiage (Grades 2–8) noncategorical Special Needs class.

These students had a variety of disabilities—developmental delays, language-processing issues, and physical disabilities. They struggled with decoding the text *The Polar Bear Son*, by Lydia Dabcovich—a story about an Inuit woman who raises a polar bear and later must release the bear back into the wild. When the students enacted the characters, they empathized deeply with them, seeing things through the characters’ eyes. Their dialogue



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Barbara S. Holden

Lenore Blank Kelner, working with young students to dramatize a story.

was rich with inferences about what the characters were thinking, feeling, saying, and doing. There were audible gasps from the teachers during the dramatization, as if something mysterious or magical had taken place. At the end of the lesson, one student blurted out, "Whoa, I have never been *in* a story before!"

After 30 years as a teaching artist, I sometimes entertain the ridiculous notion that I have worked with every type of student—students with every disability and behavioral issue in every educational setting from urban to rural. There cannot be any more surprises. But each year I encounter a new challenge that sends me back to reflecting on and revising my work. So, maybe I should share this story with my colleagues.

In the wine country of California, I taught a course on using drama to support, engage, and motivate the English Language Learner (ELL). Within this four-part course, I led

demonstration lessons so that teachers could observe the work in action.

My first class—a kindergarten in which 65% of the students were ELLs—was nothing new for me. But with this group, I felt I was herding wild cats. It was midyear, and yet just sitting still was difficult for these students. They were constantly moving, getting up, wiggling, laying down, touching each other, and talking out of turn. I had worked with active classes before, but this was extreme.

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I worked with them to dramatize the book *Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni—a story about a little black fish who loses his entire family of little red fish when they are eaten by a tuna fish. He travels alone through the ocean until he finds another family of red fish. He begs them to come and play, but they are too scared that the tuna will eat them, too. So Swimmy devises a plan. He organizes all of the red fish to swim together in the shape of one big red fish, and Swimmy becomes the eye. They move through the ocean together and scare the big fish away. The theme of the book is the power of working together for a common purpose. I had no idea how perfect *Swimmy* would be for this fragmented group.

I had to alter my plans several times midlesson in order to keep the students focused on the story and our drama work. As I incorporated a lot of whole-group response and whole-group dramatization to keep them on task, I kept wondering what the observing teachers were thinking. I did not feel they were seeing my best work.

I tried to get a student, Vanessa, to infer dialogue at several points but got no response. She was very engaged in the drama, she watched and imitated the other students, but she remained silent.

I had taped a shape of a big red fish on the floor. At the end of our drama, my plan was to have each student playing a red fish step into the taped outline of the fish to become one big fish. They were to face the same direction, "swim" in place, and Ricki as Swimmy (he was dressed in black that day) was to be the eye. And they did indeed accomplish the key task—without pushing, shoving, or touching.

When all the students were in place, Vanessa suddenly shouted out in the high-

pitched voice of a little red fish—"Swimmy, eye! Swimmy, eye!" I felt like the ground had shifted beneath me. In her outburst, this silent child had demonstrated synthesis of the text. Drama had motivated her to risk and to speak. Her two words in her little fish voice demonstrated that she had comprehended everything. Her teacher raised her arms in a silent cheer.

After the class, I learned that many of these students were the children of migrant workers from Mexico. A number had ended up living on their own in the streets while their parents came north to pick grapes. One child had been living in boxes in the streets in Mexico with his two-year-old sibling cared for by his seven-year-old brother. Our silent star, Vanessa, had been in this country only four weeks.

The teachers who observed were astounded by the students' focus and comprehension through the drama lesson. One teacher announced, "Now I know, this is the *only way* to teach ELL students." I was deeply moved by the response of the teachers and the students.

As I reflect on these two stories, I realize that there really is no mystery about why the arts produce many such miracle moments in classrooms. The students are actively participating in the lesson. They are learning through multiple learning modalities, making creative decisions, adding to the direction of the lesson, and helping to sculpt its form and format. And they are learning in the way that children have always learned best—they are enjoying the process.

The only real mystery is why state legislatures, school systems, administrators, and teachers are not clamoring for more arts integration to be used in the classrooms. The costs are low and the benefits great. Quality arts-integrated instruction can help schools achieve any school improvement plans that include meeting the needs of all students, increasing student comprehension, and providing effective professional growth and development for teachers. Integrating the arts consistently in to daily classroom instruction can fill each day with similar "miracle moments" that inspire students and teachers to grow and learn.





DC area teaching artists Judy Thibault Klevins, Stacey Coates, Lenore Blank Kelner, and Rosalind Flynn searching the horizon along with their puppet friends for late and lost teaching artist Sean Layne so they can embark on their yearly jaunt to New York City.



DC area teaching artists Rosalind Flynn, Sean Layne (yes, he made it), Lenore Blank Kelner, Stacey Coates, Judy Thibault Klevins, New York City teaching artist Jamie Winnick, DC area teaching artist Peg Koetsch and puppet friends say a fond farewell to New York City after seeing *Billy Elliot* and eating wonderful Brazilian food.

**Lenore Blank Kelner** is a teaching artist and author living in Silver Spring, MD. She is a frequent presenter for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Lenore has worked extensively for the Maryland State Department of Education and the Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts, and she has been a keynote speaker for numerous school systems and arts and education organizations throughout the United States. She has authored three books on using drama in the classroom. Her first book, *The Creative Classroom*, is in its 15th printing. Her most recent, coauthored with Rosalind Flynn, is titled *A Dramatic Approach to Reading Comprehension* (Heinemann, 2006).