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Equity Literacy in the Arts Classroom

By Emily Titterton

Vermont educators are engaged in a national movement, taking deliberate steps toward improving their teaching practices ([Act 1/H.3](#)) using the tenets of Equity Literacy. Paul Gorski defines equity literacy: “. . . as the skills and dispositions that enable us to recognize, respond to and redress (i.e., correct for) conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers. Equity literacy also describes the skills and dispositions that allow us to create and sustain equitable and just learning environments for all families and students. ([Gorski, 2014](#))

I want to make a distinction here between *Equity* and *Equity Literacy* for clarity of purpose of this article. Equity of access for all students is an important part of the arts education landscape. We are all familiar with the ways in which quality [arts programs improve outcomes for students](#). If students do not have access to a quality arts program in their school, then the conversation around Equity Literacy in the arts room is a non-starter. Equity Literacy in the arts room is a [deliberate effort to improve equity literacy](#) and to “protect Vermont’s most vulnerable populations by reducing disparities and addressing inequities that exist in our state related to race, disability status, poverty status, gender, sexuality, English Language Learner status, religion, cultural literacy, immigrant status, and refugee status.” If you read on you will see, that I argue that the arts and arts educators are expertly poised to lead in this shared responsibility.

In [a recent Tweet](#) Gorski, founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and EdChange, inquired, “Curious to know how people doing equity and justice stuff in schools incorporate the arts into that work. If you’re doing so, how are you doing it? If you know people doing it, what are they doing? Initially I was excited that the arts were included in this broad conversation about equity literacy and social justice work in schools, but the more I thought about it, the more I was confused about whether Gorski was looking for information about how general education teachers were incorporating the arts into their “equity and justice stuff” or wanted to learn about the ways in which great arts teachers handle these topics into their lessons every day. I believe that the former is a form of arts integration and the latter acknowledges how Equity Literacy is baked into arts education. Works of art and music serve as an entry point to a much larger, multi-disciplinary conversation—a visual art teacher cannot share Frida Kahlo’s work without [discussing feminism](#) the ways in which she challenges notions of beauty; a conversation about [Beyoncé’s Homecoming](#) during music class can turn into [a history lesson about “Lift Every Voice and Sing;”](#) if a theater class is reading “A Raisin in the Sun,” the larger historical context is investigated to such [redlining](#). [Representation](#) is often an accessible way to begin this work; offering up a diverse cross section of artists and musicians for students to investigate.

Equity Literacy in the Arts Classroom Cont.

In using these examples, I am not suggesting that non-arts educators should avoid incorporating the arts into their lessons; arts integration is an effective and powerful driver for learning and method for documenting said learning, as seen by [this blog post from the Tarrant Institute's](#) time in Christie Nold's 6th grade classroom at Tuttle Middle School in South Burlington. As I write this, I am trying to reinforce the ways in which arts educators are expertly positioned to Equity Literacy work in schools due to their training and the nature of their content as a reflection of the human experience. Furthermore, addressing the larger context within which works of art are created are even required by the [National Core Arts Standards](#) (NCAS). For example, Anchor Standard #8: *Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work* and Anchor Standard #11: *Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding*.

Photographer Myra Greene and Investigating Equity Literacy

Adapted from the New York Times and Seeing White, part 12 show notes

For years, artist [Myra Greene](#) had explored blackness through her photography, often in self-portraits. She wondered, what would it mean to take pictures of whiteness? For her friends, what was it like to be photographed because you're white? "My White Friends" is a series of some 50 portraits of — you guessed it — Ms. Greene's white friends. Shot in color and posed to the point of performance in some cases, the images delve into questions of race and self-perception. She did them [hoping to spur a conversation on these issues](#).

Greene's portraits were the subject of [part 12 of the podcast Seeing White](#) hosted and produced by John Biewen. In *Seeing White*, Biewen set out to take a different kind of look at race and ethnicity, by looking directly at the elephant in the room: white people, and whiteness. In embarking on this journey into whiteness, Biewen sought guidance from an array of leading scholars.

During his interview with Greene, Biewen says, "Myra talks about the White Friends project not as a statement—here's what white people look like—but as a question, an invitation to a conversation. What is "white" about this person or her environment? And does that question raise other questions, about how we look at images of people who aren't white?" Greene replied that she was interested in exploring, "How, the context of power—who controls what parts of the image. What happens when you're not in control of your own story?" *Seeing White* has a variety of supplemental resources including show notes, a [study guide](#) and episode [transcripts](#). Below are two NCAS standards and the corresponding learning targets from the [Vermont Arts Learning Target Bank](#) that could be used while critiquing, researching, and reflecting upon Greene's work with 8th grade and high school visual art students.

Cn11- Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Performance Indicator:

Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity. (VA:Cn11.1.8)

Learning Target:

I can use examples to explain the ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

Re8- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Performance Indicator:

Interpret an artwork or collection of works, supported by relevant evidence found in the work and its various contexts. (VA: Re8.1.HSI)

Learning Target:

I can support my interpretation of artwork with evidence found in the work and its social, cultural, or political context.

Art and Music Professional Teaching Standards for Equity and Diversity

Frameworks are readily available as an accessible way to name, discuss, and think through complex topics such as race, gender, religion, disability status, etc. within the classroom setting. Whether your program is just starting these conversations or this is part of an ongoing effort, a resource from [the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards: Equity and Diversity](#) can provide a structure for reflecting on your teaching practice or for department-wide planning. Visual art PreK-8 educators can find professional standards on pages 4-8 and visual art 8-12 educators on pages 9-12. The categories for the visual art standards are:

- Teachers Value and Respect Diversity among Students,
- Teachers Make Connections to the Cultures of Communities,
- Teachers Guard against Bias and Stereotypes, and
- Teachers Foster Equity.

PreK-12 Music Educators can be found on pages 55-58 and the categories are as follows:

- Providing Equitable Access to Music Instruction
- Building Repertoires and Teaching Strategies That Include Music Chosen from a World Sample
- Highlighting the Cultural and Contextual Dimensions of Music
- Working Successfully with Music Students with Exceptionalities
- Responding Effectively to Students for Whom English Is a New Language

Shorts

Young at Art from Vermont Public Radio (VPR)

[Young at Art is a new series on VPR](#). Every Monday this summer VPR will share interviews with artists under 40 about what inspires their work and how they view the future for artists in the state. Thus far, the series has featured People Academy's art teacher and ceramicist Averill McDowell, the dance educators of *Lines*, a new studio in South Burlington, and cellist and composer Lauren Costello. To see images of their work, visit the show notes for each segment.

Integrated Art Academy Featured in *The Creative Brain* Documentary

[The Creative Brain](#) is a new documentary on Netflix about human creativity. It takes audiences on a journey with neuroscientist and best-selling author, David Eagleman, to meet accomplished professionals from across the creative spectrum, unravel the creative process, and encourage all of us to be more creative. Burlington School District's Integrated Arts Academy and its [model of education are highlighted](#) in the movie, putting forth that if creativity has proven outcomes, incorporating it into our system of education can develop a more creative, healthy, and thriving community.

Contemporary Artist Spotlight: Nathalie Meibach

[Nathalie Meibach](#) is a Boston-based artist who translates weather data into complex sculptures and musical scores. Her work focuses on the intersection of art and science and the visual representation of scientific observations. Her woven sculptures interpret scientific data related to astronomy, ecology and meteorology. Her pieces simultaneously function as works of art, musical compositions, and illustrations of environmental change. By utilizing artistic processes and everyday materials, Meibach questions and expands the boundaries of traditional science data visualization -- and provokes questions about what visual vocabulary is in the domain of science and/or art. Her work is well worth a look and a listen. Her [TEDtalk is titled *Art Made of Storms*](#).

Student Graduation Challenge Project on Art Education

Talia Loiter is a 2019 Champlain Valley Union High School graduate and plans to study Environmental Science at the University of Vermont next year. This piece is an adaptation of her Graduate Challenge project, which all CVU seniors are required to complete. She researched, performed interviews, and engaged in community-based learning on the topic of Art Education. The rest of this article is from Talia's perspective.

Kids don't get enough time in art class, especially because "The Arts Help Achieve Multiple Measures of Success" according to Americans for the Arts. "We know that factors such as school climate and culture and social and emotional learning affect both student and school success. However, did you know that the arts can play a role in developing each of these areas?" This is what I learned in a Shelburne Community School (SCS) art class. For my grad challenge I was a Teacher's Assistant (TA), twice a week for two months, for Carin Lilly's seventh grade art classes. Through this experience, I learned the importance of workflow, how to effectively run a classroom, and how important art education is for children.

Two recurring themes from my time as a TA were *connecting with students* and *taking a break*. Ms. Lilly said in an interview that the most important part of teaching a successful art class is "Connecting with students, [and] showing empathy... then really understanding what it takes for them to feel safe to explore and inspired." During my time in the classroom I learned how important art class is for the students in other ways. Ms. Bresler, also an art teacher at SCS, described "Art is a natural release for students. I could argue the value of art because of creativity or a million other things...but to me art is an important break in a student's day where they get to be fully themselves without judgement. To be a well-rounded human, you must understand yourself fully. Art allows you to explore yourself." Ms. Lilly and I also discussed this issue. These kids are constantly trying to navigate the complicated middle school social scene, do well in school, and figure out who they are and want to be. They can sometime forget to take a break; art class lets them explore what they want and be themselves.

After a few weeks of working with the kids to build relationships and learn how the classroom worked, I got a chance to teach. Ms. Lilly and I brainstormed what we wanted to include in the unit. We decided on a little bit of photography history, good composition techniques, and finally editing. The first thing I did was create a slideshow with examples of basic composition techniques like leading lines, contrast, stop action, panning, different angles for portraits, and good lighting. I presented to the class and we assigned small groups of students to well-known photographers, asking them to find artwork that utilized the techniques they had studied, and lastly present their findings. Then students went outside with cameras in the form of iPads, phones, point and shoot cameras, and two DSLR cameras were passed around. After a few days of working with the cameras, it was time to upload photos to their google drive and edit them in Pixlr Editor.

This project gave me a huge amount of insight. It was very interesting to see the other side of a classroom and get a new perspective. I have a new respect for art teachers and educators of every kind. I never planned to go into art education and I don't think I will, but this project was valuable to me. I now understand how important it is to incorporate art and creativity into everyday life. As high school got busier for me this year, I started to put my art aside because I didn't have time. Now I realize that it is something that's okay to spend time on!

I think we could all take the lessons of art education to heart. Firstly, find opportunities to grow and learn new things in interesting and exciting ways. Then lay out a plan before you start something new in order to be efficient and effective. Lastly, don't forget to have fun, take a break, and be yourself.

First Kennedy Center Education Artist-in-Residence: Mo Willems

Emmy Award-winning writer and number one New York Times best-selling author and illustrator Mo Willems is the very first [Education Artist-in-Residence at the Kennedy Center in New York, City](#). Willems will develop and present multidisciplinary programming and performances across the Kennedy Center including theater, jazz, dance, classical music, comedy, digital experience, and outreach over the next two years.

Here are a couple of Willems-related resources for use in your classroom or just for fun and the corresponding NCAS and learning targets from the [Vermont Arts Learning Target Bank](#):

- [The story of the story of Because](#)
[Because](#) tells the story of a young girl who grows up to become a composer. Her first symphony, "The Cold," is inspired by events that led her to fall in love with music. Hilary Purrington [composed a short work](#) to accompany this beautiful tale about the interconnectedness of life.
[MU:Re7.2.2](#), Learning Target: I can tell how specific music concepts are used to support a specific purpose in music.
- [The Elephant and Piggie Dance Game](#)
This fun, interactive game features beloved characters Gerald the Elephant and Piggie. Users choreograph dances with moves such 'Jumbo Gumbo' and 'Piggie Jiggie' to different musical styles. The possibilities are endless for this game—as a literal warm up or a problem-solving activity.
[DA:Cr1.1.HS1a](#), Learning Targets: I can experiment with elements of dance and a variety of stimuli to create work and generate ideas. I can use multiple strategies to create movement.
- [You Can Never Find a Rickshaw When It Monsoons - The World on One Cartoon a Day](#)
A collection of the author's sketches, done during a yearlong trip around the world soon after his college graduation, offers a unique snapshot of the artist's coming-of-age as he tries to understand the world around him.
[VA:Re7.1.HS1](#), Learning Target: I can use evidence to explain the ways in which artwork communicates ideas about the human experience.
- [Don't Pigeonhole Me! \(Two Decades of the Mo Willems Sketchbook\)](#)
Readers are given a rare glimpse into the mind of the man the New York Times described as "The biggest new talent to emerge thus far in the '00s." Since he was a teenager, Mo has been creating characters and scribbling ideas in the pages of sketchbooks. These sketchbooks have always been the well from which Mo draws ideas and inspiration. [Don't Pigeonhole Me!](#) reveals the author/illustrator at his most truthful, most experimental, and most grown-up.
[VA:Cr1.1.5](#), Learning Target: I can brainstorm and combine ideas to create original artwork.

Photographs on page 1: Left, Students from Bradford Elementary School participating in Rock Fest at Catamount Arts. There were about 250 performers and over 600 in attendance. Center, music educators starting the day rocking out with [@littlekidsrock](#). Right, Two out of three impromptu bands at the [@littlekidsrock](#) music educators composed songs lamenting about "spring" in Vermont.

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Explaining the Standards: *Need to Know Now*

If you are just beginning your journey with the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS), here are three *Need to Know Now* resources to get you started on the right path. These resources were written by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards. The information and recommendations that are included in each of the three issues, can help educators to start to implement NCAS with intention.

These and other supplemental resources can be found on the [NCAS resources page](#).

- [Volume 1-2018: Issue 1 Unpacking the NCAS Conceptual Framework](#)
- [Volume 1-2018: Issue 2 Artistic Processes](#)
- [Volume 1-2018: Issue 3 Anchor Standards](#)

Events and Announcements**VT Art Teacher of the Year Nomination Form**

The Vermont Art Teacher Association is searching for nominations for the 2020 Vermont Art Teacher of the Year. If you would like to nominate an outstanding art teacher, please fill out the form below. [2020 Vermont Art Teacher of the Year Nomination Form](#). Any questions, please contact vtartteachers@gmail.com."

Vermont Arts Learning Target Bank

The Vermont Arts Learning Target Bank is a collection of learning targets aligned to the [National Core Arts Standards](#) (NCAS). The NCAS performance standards for Kindergarten to Advanced High School have been "unpacked" into learning targets. Educators can use them to clarify learning expectations for students, develop proficiency scales, and construct rubrics. The learning targets were created and vetted by Vermont educators. Targets are included for all five NCAS arts disciplines: Dance, Music, Media Arts, Theater, and Visual Art. Additional grade levels will be added as they become available. To learn more about the Vermont Arts Learning Target Bank read the [Introduction](#) and [How to Use this Resource Guide](#). To access the Vermont Arts Learning Target Bank visit resources section of [the Agency of Education Arts webpage](#).

New Resource: ESSA, Title IV, and the Arts

This new resource consists of three components: An [Introduction to ESSA and the Arts](#), [the Arts and Title IV, Part A: Frequently Asked Questions](#), and [the Arts and Level of Evidence](#). The goal of these resources is to provide arts educators and supporters of the arts with information about funding opportunities that exist in ESSA for the arts and a well-rounded education. Additionally, administrators can use this guide to inform their Continuous Improvement Plans and applications for federal funds. This guide focuses specifically on arts funding opportunities through Title IV, Part A. To access the ESSA and the Arts suite of resources visit [the Agency of Education Arts webpage](#).

We're on the Web!

See us at:

<http://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/content-areas/arts>