

# Arts Integration as an Approach for Anti-racist Pedagogy: A Case Study

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## Abstract

In this article, the author examined how arts integration affected the design, implementation of the learning and teaching experience in a course that incorporated anti-racist pedagogy (ARP) in a two-year community college in an urban area. Using an intrinsic case study method (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles et al., 2014), this study triangulated the collected data that included the transcript of a focus group discussion, two polling results, and the students' reflection essays. The significance of this research will bridge the gaps in existing literature across ARP, culturally responsive pedagogy, and arts integration following two research questions: 1) how arts integration affects ARP; 2) how the classroom activities and course materials affect students' perception of the learning environment. Built on the existing literature on ARP (Kishimoto, 2018; Rubenstein, 2021; Sue, 2013), CRP (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2014), and arts integration (Burnaford et al., 2007; Duma, 2014; Robinson, 2013; Shockley & Krakaur, 2020), the study employed coding and memoing processes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) and reached the findings from the data that suggested: 1) group discussions are essential to establishing and maintaining an anti-racist learning environment, and 2) arts integration can be helpful in boosting a more welcoming atmosphere for a diverse group of students.

## Introduction

### Context of the Case

In June 2022, I participated in a week-long Anti-racist Pedagogy (ARP) Seminar which aimed to "support faculty and teaching staff in creating more equitable and inclusive teaching and learning spaces through the application of anti-racist pedagogical teaching practices" (Polite et al., 2022). Upon noticing more than one Seminar participant's ARP innovations involved arts integration, I decided to empirically document and study arts integration as an approach for ARP in my course titled Asian American History in Fall 2022. This article is the result of the semester-long implementation and self-reflexivity of ARP and art integration. The first part of the article offers a short review of literature that inspired the author's anti-racist innovations and arts-rich practices.

The second part of the article outlines the research method, participants and setting, validity, and limitations of this study. The third part contains the analysis and interpretation of the two themes that emerged from the collected data, and concluded with recommendations for future practice and research.

### Purpose of the Study

Motivated by my previous professional background in performing arts and my ongoing research trajectory, both of which focus on the interconnectivity between arts integration and cultural competencies, this study aims to connect the application of anti-racist pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and arts integration.

### Researcher's Positionalities

Being an external-insider (Banks, 1998) on the subjects of racism and arts integration who attempts to utilize arts integration as an anti-racist pedagogy tool in higher education, I grounded and checked my ARP practices primarily on the six key principles proposed by Dr. Whitney Peoples that includes "[centering] both structural and personal manifestations of racism," "[bridging] theory and practice," and "[focusing] on the importance of process over time" (Practicing Anti-Racist Pedagogy, n.d.). Throughout the course, I repeatedly conducted critical self-reflection in whether or not the classroom activities and course content were being "decolonized" (Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020; St. Clair & Kishimoto, 2010). I was also constantly reminded that teaching about race is not the same as teaching with APR, and that my social position and my racial/ethnic identity—an international student from Taiwan who became a United States citizen through naturalization—needed to be addressed in front of my students (Kishimoto, 2018).

### Literature Review

#### Anti-racist Pedagogy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Considering the course I decided to study, in this literature review the focus of ARP is presented as a dichotomy

of two areas of discussion: 1) there is a distinction between what to teach and how to teach; and 2) teaching staff should always be self-reflective about their race and social positions (Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020; Kandaswamy, 2007; Kishimoto, 2018; McGee, 2020; St. Clair & Kishimoto, 2010; Sue, 2013; Tanner, 2013). Considering race as one of the various cultural traits affecting identity development in college years, ARP's vision for a more equitable and inclusive learning environment overlaps that of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) which emphasizes faculty and school leadership's ongoing and reflective efforts to elucidate the increasingly diverse student population (Bond, 2017; Chun & Evans, 2016; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; van de Bunt-Kokhuis & Weir, 2013). In their comprehensive review of existing literature and practices on cultural competence, Chun and Evans (2016) surmised the goals towards which both ARP and CRP strive to achieve: creating an ecological infrastructure on campuses that "that support student identity development and intergroup contact" (Chun & Evans, 2016, p. 127).

Nonetheless, ARP and CRP diverge when it comes to who is at the center of transformation. ARP emphasizes how to create and facilitate classroom activities so that teachers and students from the dominant cultures (more so than from minority cultures) can feel more comfortable and stay engaged in the "race talks," and consequently much of the ARP literature was centered on the experience of the white students and white faculty (Smith & Glenn, 2019; Sue, 2013) and how they can or should embrace APR. On the other hand, CRP seeks to expand all teachers' reflexivity and help them become more proactive and considerate in the curriculum preparation and facilitation so that the minority or marginalized students can thrive from the learning experience just as, if not more than, their counterparts (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). For example, according to studies, even teachers of African descent at times need to be reminded of their "Eurocentric curriculum" and how their teaching dismissed the "cultural beings" of themselves and their African American students (West-Olatunji et al., 2008).

It is noteworthy that both ARP and CRP can find their root in or connection with critical race theory (CRT) in that both aim to achieve "equal opportunity" for all individuals despite racial differences (Kishimoto, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998). More urgently, it should also be noted that recent literature on CRT includes arguments from both CRT's opponents and proponents as it gained national attention in the political arena (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020; Morgan, 2022). It was under this genealogical and political backdrop of these theories that I proactively reflected arts integration's potential as an approach for ARP, CRP, and, more broadly speaking, inclusive teaching in higher education.

### **Arts Integration and Arts Education**

Earlier literature has shown discussions on the differences between analytical/cognitive thinking and creative process of learning, which is "subject to different definitions and interpretations" (Massialas & Zevin, 1967).

Therefore, in this research, I followed Burnaford et al.'s extensive literature review on arts integration for which they offered three categories of definitions: 1) arts integration as learning "through" and "with" the arts; 2) arts integration as a curricular connections process; and 3) arts integration as collaborative engagement, with a notion that the terms can be "different things to different people in different situations and context" (Burnaford et al., 2007, pp. 11-12). Despite that the term arts integration's openness to wide-ranging definitions and applications since its inception in early twentieth century by practitioners and theorists (Bresler, 1995; Burnaford et al., 2007; Duma, 2014; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006), the results of incorporating artistic and creative components in classroom activities or assignments have proved to increase students and teachers' cultural competency (Arveklev et al., 2018; Creech & Zomorodian, 2017; King & Anderson, 2004; Liu, 2022; Shockley & Krakaur, 2020). Furthermore, notwithstanding the lack of robust empirical studies on arts education (Eisner, 1999; Winner & Cooper, 2000) and the continually evolving definition of the term cultural competence (Bustamante et al., 2009; Chun & Evans, 2016; Overall, 2009), studies have also shown that arts education and arts integration can develop or increase students and teachers' cross-cultural competence in college environments. While some claimed arts integration booted students' empathy towards others and enhanced their world view (Creech & Zomorodian, 2017; King & Anderson, 2004), others demonstrated that artistic experiences or creative practices enhanced individuals' cross-cultural understanding across race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality (Arveklev et al., 2018; Liu, 2022; Shockley & Krakaur, 2020). As I continued to contemplate and make efforts to create ARP innovations for my diverse students, arts integration and its benefits became an apparent choice.

### **Bridging the Gap in Existing Literature**

Inferred from existing literature, ARP, CRP, and arts integration all strive to seek solutions to address the problematic issues in schools that are exacerbated under the political, religious, socioeconomic divides in society. In higher education settings, however, there is a lack of robust research on arts integration and anti-racism in ways that empirically speak to their connection, let alone how either actually effect students or teachers' cross-cultural competence. This paper is a preliminary attempt to bridge the gap in existing literature by calling attention to the relationship between ARP and arts integration.

### **Method**

Given the unique situation, this study employed an intrinsic case study method (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This study is unique in that 1) while arts integration has been widely explored in the K-12 setting, faculty and administration in higher education tend to be keener about arts education that pertains to training professional artists (e.g., musicians, painters, dancers, actors, etc.) instead of the practices and research of the integration of artistic and creative components across academic disciplines in colleges and

universities; and 2) as alluded earlier, even though ARP and arts integration have steadily gained attention from stakeholders in higher education, there is a dearth of literature focused primarily on the interconnectivity of both. Acknowledging the uniqueness of the situation, the author utilized purposeful sampling, convenience sampling, and holistic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 151) to investigate the "context of the case" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 152), attempting to empirically document and study arts integration as an approach for ARP.

### Participants and Setting

This study was conducted throughout a fully online synchronous course titled Asian American History in Fall 2022 at a two-year public community college in an urban area. 22 students enrolled in the course, 8 students provided a reflection essay respectively on their learning experience during the course, and 7 out of the 8 essay writers participated in a focus group discussion. Statistics show that the average age of the student population in the school is 24 years old, with 52.2% of students falling into the range of 18-21, 19.2% in age 22-24, 14.8% in age 25-29, and 13.7% in 30 and over. In recent history of the college, Black and Hispanic students consisted of over two-thirds of the population while White students and Asian students each comprised approximately 15% of the population. The female-to-male ratio was approximately 6-to-4 and the majority (64%) of the students studied full-time. In this study, the participants, four of whom self-identified as Asian, two as Hispanic, and two as White, all fell into the age range of 18-24, while the gender ratio was 50/50.

The students were informed and invited to participate in the research in week 8. The invitation was offered verbally during multiple class meetings to ensure that students fully understand the context of the research. The participants' consent was received and documented digitally in a password-protected virtual space. On every occasion where I mentioned such invitation, I reassured the students that their anonymized participation in the research will not affect their grades in the course.

To increase the effectiveness of reading materials, a variety of tools or sources that contained artistic or creative elements were incorporated into the weekly course modules. Such opportunities included films and documentaries, literature (multiple poems and a theatrical play), graphics (such as posters, advertisements, photography, news cartoons, etc.), short videos of visual artists or performing artists' presentation or panel discussions, two online synchronous guest talks (one guest was Asian American in his 20's working in journalism in San Francisco, CA and another was Asian American in his 40's working as a singer/songwriter in Nashville, TN). All of the materials and opportunities, including the required text and arts-related content, were provided at no cost to the students.

A major innovation that combined ARP and arts integration in this course was that, after the first two weeks, I

utilized an anonymous poll to find out if my students would prefer having more discussions as credited assignments. The result was a unanimous yes that led to four more online discussion forums on top of two forums already in the syllabus. In each discussion forum, every student must first share a post and then respond to at least two classmates' reflection on the weekly materials. Inspired by the notion of what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called "the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009), I reminded the students of the value of every individual's learning process and urged each student to take advantage of the various learning tools in their reflection while staying open-minded to everyone else's opinions, experiences, and observations.

### Data Collection

The data used in this study were collected by following the triangulation principle (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). The first source of the data was students' reflection essays. The second source was the results of the anonymous polls that I conducted during a 40-minute focus group. The third source of data was a transcript of the said focus group discussion conducted on Zoom. The polls used in the focus group meeting contained two questions: 1) single choice: which of the course materials or activities has been more effective than the rest, and 2) multiple choice: which of the course materials or activities helps create an anti-racist learning environment. The polls were executed via the polling feature embedded in the Zoom app.

Noting that there is a distinction between teaching race-related subjects and teaching with anti-racist pedagogy (Kishimoto, 2018; St. Clair & Kishimoto, 2010), I made conscious efforts to ensure the participants were aware of the difference between Asian American History, the subject of the course, and ARP, the instructional framework under which the course was being conducted. In multiple occasions, I asked students to clarify their answers in order to verify their relevancy and the focus of this study. This is of significance because, given the historical and socioeconomic context of the course subjects, many of the class discussions were essentially about racism or other forms of discrimination based on cultural differences. The data used in this study are sifted through and only the information pertaining to learning or pedagogical experience was included in the analysis.

### Validity and Limitations

To enhance the validity of this study, I constantly examined the research process by employing the validity criteria proposed by Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001), who recommended that researchers should check if 1) the interpretation is accurate of the participants' meaning, 2) different voices are heard, 3) the investigator is self-critical, 4) the investigator remains vivid, explicit, creative, thorough, and sensitive throughout the process (Creswell & Poth, 2017, pp. 346-347). Above all, I prioritized the effort to hold truthful and accurate of the meaning of my students' essays and conversation. To achieve this, the tools of memoing (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) and holistic analysis

(Creswell & Poth, 2017) were heavily relied upon. As mentioned above, circumstances are rare where the use and evaluation of ARP and arts integration are simultaneously on display throughout the design or execution of a course. Therefore, the replicability of this study presents a limitation. Furthermore, this study is limited by the locality and modality of the course: a fully online synchronous course that is inherently focused on race subjects in a two-year public community college in an urban area with a student population that is primarily people of color or immigrants. As such, readers of this article are reminded to be cautious of the transferability of the findings that emerged from the data of this study. In addition, due to the lack of participating instructors other than myself as the teacher-researcher, the data may be critically skewed due to the teacher-student power dynamic despite my efforts to avoid as such.

### Findings and Discussions

Having combed through the relevancy and reached the saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) of the data, two themes emerged from the findings in this study: 1) discussions helped create an anti-racist environment, and 2) arts integration was an effective learning approach as ARP. The section below contains an analysis of the two themes followed by concluding words of recommendations for higher education professionals to consider similar endeavors in the future.

#### Discussions Help Create an Anti-racist Environment

Based on the students' reflective essays, the polling results, and the focus group discussion, it was clear that discussions-in class and on blackboard-were the most effective way (compared to listening to lectures, writing essays, preparing/conducting presentations) to increase a judgement-free environment where students felt encouraged to be themselves. For example, Gorge, one Asian American student noted: "[The discussion board] was the place where I felt confident enough to speak about an experience I could relate to and something I went through, knowing that I would not be judged." Another student, who was of Caucasian descent, added, "the discussion boards were the best plan to open up to how I felt about each documentary or reading that was presented." Another White also reflected, "having a weekly discussion made it very easy to deconstruct and explain my learnings in a safe forum of exchanging ideas."

Other than helping make the students feel included and heard, these discussions also functioned as opportunities where students could expand their views on the subject matters. For example, Ethan noted how the discussions allowed him to see things differently, saying "the discussions gave me different ideas and points of view that I would not have thought of if it were not for the discussions." Furthermore, Ethan wrote about how the learning experience made him more empathetic about other people: "It makes me want to become kinder and more open-minded as I do not wish to be disrespectful because I know how much my actions can affect others."

The use of in-class polls was also a tool that made students feel like they could share honestly without being judged. Aside from the two polls that were used during the focus group meeting for this study, several anonymous polls were incorporated into the online synchronous meetings. As Mary, a Hispanic female student recalled her experience using the polls, "one thing that I really appreciated was when [the instructor] would do opinion polls and we were able to answer anonymously as well as see the opinions on topics that my classmates had." An example is worth mentioning here to indicate how effective and constructive the polling tool was. Having learned about how Affirmative Action has impacted members of Asian American communities (for more context, read Gomez, 2022; Kahlenberg, 2022), the students were instructed to discuss in class whether or not Affirmative Action should be employed in the college and university admission process. The same poll was instrumented before and after the discussion. Before the discussion, the poll showed that only one student disapproves of the use of Affirmative Action in college admission. After the discussion, however, only one student remains approving of colleges and universities employing Affirmative Action in the admission process. Regardless of the eloquence and knowledge of each student that participated in the discussion, the interaction and the results of the polls demonstrated how students shared and voiced their opinions freely.

#### Arts Integration Can be an Effective Learning Approach

Reflecting on which materials or activities were the most effective way to learn, most respondents favored documentaries and films, compared to other artistic/creative engagement. However, one student preferred guest speakers over other activities, noting that the two guest talks were the "most interesting part of the course" because they provided him "with specific insight of individuals growing up and working towards their success as Asian Americans in the United States." Other than saying the films and documentaries were easier to digest, especially for those who consider themselves "visual learners," most students expressed that these audiovisual materials helped them retain and understand the texts more effectively, which in turn made it more likely for them to participate in each discussion. For example, Eric, a White student, specified how these materials helped him learn better about the history because "my generation grew up watching visual images, such as movies and social media videos, it was natural for me to concentrate on watching documentaries and movies without an effort."

Furthermore, the data in this study suggested that films and documentaries, given their digestibility, accessibility, and entertaining quality, made students relate to one another in discussions (online and in-class) more easily because those materials were a learning tool that all students can fully absorb. For example, Ruth, an Asian American student, expressed that, "listening to everyone's experience about the same materials was really interesting. It made me realize how sometimes we can relate with one another and other times we don't think alike." This shared experience as a result of such learning process (watching,

reflecting, sharing, and listening) helped create a sense of community where each student could apply their newly obtained knowledge in discussions while sharing their personal experience or family stories (some were deeply moving and emotional) without feeling judged or discriminated.

Additionally, films and documentaries offered an opportunity for students to feel empathetic in ways that reading materials couldn't. Jacob, a Hispanic student, recalled his experience watching a documentary, saying, "the visual image of Toru Saito talking to the other Japanese guy with his emotion involved made me want to remember this documentary, and I also felt sympathy while I was watching it. I am pretty sure that I would not have remembered what he said if I had read his words from a book instead of the documentary."

However, there were some limits when it comes to the effectiveness of arts integration. Ethan student expressed that, "the documentaries did not help me understand the course subjects because I cannot watch long videos. I lose interest fast, and it is quite easy for me to get distracted which will usually make me miss stuff." Moreover, despite how most students favored the audio-visual materials over readings, other artistic or creative components introduced in the syllabus received lukewarm enthusiasm, which bears the question of why and how certain arts integration works better than other. According to the analysis and memos in this study, it is found that films and documentaries forced most student to experience one subject for a lengthy period of time. In comparison, the guest talks, clips of visual art presentations, or artists panel discussions all last much shorter than a film or documentary. Regardless of the artistry of each artist involved in each presentation or panel, the length of the material may be a primary factor that dictates the effectiveness of an art experience. Paradoxically, as noted above, there would be students who could not digest long videos. Students' various preferences for learning tools require teachers to be more sensitive not just about students' racial identities but their nuanced learning needs.

### Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

This study is the author's first attempt to conduct empirical research on the intersectionality of ARP and arts integration in higher education. Oftentimes, inherent in the history about Asian Americans is a plethora of emotionally unsettling and intellectually perplexing stories caused by racist beliefs and behaviors. This study gave me the opportunity to attentively differentiate between teaching race-centered subjects and teaching them with an anti-racist manner. Knowing that race is at the core of all materials in the course, I constantly and proactively encouraged the students to insert their identities and voice their experiences freely as a way to "decolonize the classroom" (Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020; St. Clair & Kishimoto, 2010). Meanwhile, I constructed an art-rich teaching framework through the lens of cultural competence to help myself become more reflective of my own social positionalities, more sensitive about my students' iden-

ties, and more conscious about the decisions they made and why they make them (Shockley & Krakaur, 2020), all of which coincide with the goals of ARP.

Based on the findings in this article, it can be inferred that a well-made audio-visual material related to the course subject not only can help students learn and retain the subject matters better, but it also creates a shared experience for all students to engage in an effective and rewarding discussion. Consequently, it creates a more welcoming, anti-racist learning environment. However, more research questions await answering. For example, does an anti-racist environment beget an engaging discussion or vice versa? Does arts integration inevitably and absolutely create and encourage an anti-racist environment? Such inquiries not only deserve more attention from education professionals but also require more studies with robust empirical research mechanism. The author hopes this article will ignite more interests and resources to sustain the endeavor of investigating arts integration as an approach to apply anti-racist pedagogy.

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## Professional Development

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