



## Incorporating the Arts into Learning

### **Lauren Clouser**

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to The LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Kelly Tanzi, a writing teacher for fourth grade of Blessed Sacrament school with a background in special education. Kelly is also the president of LDA of Maryland and the chair of the state of Maryland Literacy Association. Kelly, thank you so much for being here today with us.

### **Kelly Tanzi:**

Oh, I am so excited to be here with you and LDA.

### **Lauren Clouser:**

We can't wait to dive into bringing arts into language arts. But to start off, would you be able to tell us a little bit about yourself and your experience?

### **Kelly Tanzi:**

Of course. So I have been an educator for over twenty five years, which is very humbling to say. And I have worked in public, private, parochial schools, for my educational career. I was inspired to continue my work in special education when I met Sally Smith at the Lab School and at American University, and I kind of dug very deeply into what she promoted in special education at her very core, which was, you know, how do we celebrate each learner and preserve the dignity while we do that? And so special education has always been very much at the forefront of how I teach in a room. I'm always thinking about how I can differentiate, and the arts really help make that especially possible.

### **Lauren Clouser:**

Yeah. I think that's such a good thing to keep in mind. We've had some people in the past who have told us about their experience of being harmed by the school system and not feeling that support. So I'd love to dive in more with you about how the arts can benefit. So to start off, when we talk about bringing the arts into language arts, what does that mean? Just to differentiate the two.

### **Kelly Tanzi:**

Sure. So a lot of times, students will be assigned projects, and it'll be a very, for lack of better term, I always say a flat project, but it's one dimensional. It's not multisensory, and it's very much: Okay, here's what you are supposed to do. You type it. You give it back. And for a lot of our learners, it really helps equate what they are so good at doing when we offer a kinesthetic or a multisensory approach, which is what the arts give us. I think that when we do book reports, when we do genre reports, we can offer a menu that offers many different artistic approaches to how we can share what is in the literature and make sure that the students really did understand all of the different devices we're looking for.

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Certainly, we need them to reach those benchmarks, but they can do it in a way through the arts that can give them some more agency about their work. And how that looks is if we had a mystery book report, let's say, and they had menu items to choose from. And let's say there was a game where they'd have to identify the characters in the book, the plot, the different settings. They could create that in their games, and they did that. I've taught ancient civilizations in the past, and we've had projects there too. Some students have even gone so far as when we've talked about India, they have actually created a Taj Mahal for me with Legos, the entire background. And then they certainly told us all of the features about that particular incredible tourist attraction and all of the features that I needed to hear to know they understood that wonderful landmark in India. There are so many ways that when we're reading literature, we can make the arts come alive.

Let's just say, in the *Watsons Go to Birmingham*, for example, in that wonderful novel, they reference different music of that time period. The *Watsons* go to Birmingham in 1963, right? And so they mentioned, like, oh, The Coasters were playing in the brown bomber. Well, what in the world are The Coasters? That's very archaic to our kids now. They would never know what that group was. So you're playing that music as they walk in. You are looking further into the chapters, and you see Langston Hughes is being featured in the book by one of the characters. And then you extrapolate from that, and you can then introduce Jacob Lawrence, the artist who actually has a beautiful portrait of Harlem, which is the poem that Langston Hughes wrote, Harlem. And kids can also create Harlem from Jacob Lawrence's inspiration, and we connect it all together.

And it is multifaceted, and they are learning in so many different ways. And it makes the information stick more when we have multisensory approaches to it, and they ask more questions that way too. Those are some of the ways I incorporate art into language arts. I'm sorry, not just language arts, but into any core content, like history where we are required to read something and then share what we read and articulate that.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Yeah. Absolutely. Well I like how it's not just one piece of media or one form of art too. You just showed all the different connections that will help students to really make it 3D for them.

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Yes.

**Lauren Clouser:**

And these are some awesome projects, but I know we had talked before about some of the awesome projects that you had your students doing. So could you tell us, maybe do you have any favorites that you've done over the years?

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Well, boy, I have so many wonderful projects that I am excited about. I mean, the students, when we do poetry units, for example, we had to stop our poetry unit this year because we got to celebrate the holidays in the middle of that. And so we're still completing that. And we've just recently done another wonderful poetry unit where we're incorporating the arts into that when we celebrate Asian Heritage Month. And so we just had a wonderful project where we showed, when we had Yo Yo Ma playing in the background, and then we had, forgive my pronunciation, but it was Katsushika Hokusai. And we had The Great Wave as one piece of painting, and then we had Mount Fuji as the other painting to show two different landforms. And the kids were supposed to write a Diamante poem about that, but they got to have that kind of wonderful cue based off of the art to celebrate Asian Heritage Month.

And they were very excited because we also needed them to list adjectives, nouns, and verbs based on what they saw. And so they started immediately sharing all the adjectives they had based on the beautiful works of art. And so those are the types of things I like to use as hooks, if you will. The arts help me have literary hooks for our kids, and it helps really bring things to life. So that's one huge thing I do, and literary theater is another thing I do that helps bring the arts into the classroom. When we learn about, let's say, again, India or if we learn about a different geographical spot, it's wonderful to be able to incorporate dialogue through play and help the kids reenact and experience dialogue that would have happened through ancient tales in that part of the world. So we did the great Ramayana once, to talk about India, a very great epic tale, and they had to reenact it. And they had such a ball creating the sets for it and things like that.

So we have many ways that we can help activate creativity and help even our dyslexic students in particular shine when we bring the arts into language arts. They feel so empowered, and it just kind of really, really opens their creativity and their knack of sharing orally, and through visual pieces, what they can do.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Well, and I wanted to expand on that too a little bit, especially for dyslexic students or students who struggle with writing. How is incorporating the arts...could you expand a little bit more on why this is such a great form for them to learn with?

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Well, it takes the pressure off of the pure focus of the written word to begin with. And so they

feel freer. Their anxiety becomes lower where they just feel more at ease with the product they're going to produce because they know this is a way that they shine, and they know that this is a less judgmental way that they're going to be able to show what they know accurately and in a very intelligent way. And in a way, they feel that they're experts actually. And, I have one specific young man right now who I really believe is going to be famous one day. And I cannot tell you how much he shines when he is able to express his knowledge through the arts first and then certainly through the words that he is needing to do to show what he knows. I mean, he does oral reports for us. They do oral reports for us.

And, of course, you know, he can speak about what he has produced artistically through many formats. You know, it's not just poster boards sometimes. They use other means too. And he really appreciates that venue for starting the writing process. And we have lots of graphic organizers for these things as well so that they know how to get started and don't feel bogged down after they've created a beautiful visual piece. So there's a very big process to it, but we like to lower the anxiety first and create a hook of interest, if you will. Because I mean, once you have the connection, it just really opens everything up for our learners, the accessibility of it all.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Yeah. That's a really good point. Well, another benefit of the arts too is that you're able to celebrate different cultures, which you were mentioning with some of your previous projects. Can you talk about the importance of that?

**Kelly Tanzi:**

The arts help us so immensely to really bring us together. You know, it's funny. Some of my students right now, they get so excited. They're like, what month is it now, Mrs. Tanzi? And, you know, I get excited too because we know in our classrooms, again, from the beginning when we start our year, we talk about what's in a name, and they bring in a picture of who they are and they love to share, culturally, their backgrounds. And from that, you know, I like to get literature in the room that represents...we have characters in the books that represent them culturally. That way they feel a big part of it because a lot of times, there are only books that are with particular, common themes, things like that. But when they get to have a character, I have one young man who's from Cuba. He's so happy to have a book with the background of Cuban characters in it, and another from Poland, and, you know, we wanna celebrate everyone here.

Once I had a class where we had the book *Seed Folks*, and that was a book that really celebrated 13 different cultures coming together in a tenement. And they're all coming together, but they're unified by this one garden. And I was asked to create a field trip based off of that theme. Right? And so I was like, uh-uh. Okay. This should be exciting. So to celebrate cultures in the classroom and to celebrate cultures that we learned about in the book, we then went and took a trip to New York City, and we went to see *Wicked*, because that certainly celebrates what does society do with a difference. And, you know, we had all of these different cultures that come together at first.

Do they embrace it? Do they turn away? And the kids in the room were so excited by that piece of art, you know, when we could see theatrical art to bring that literature together. And then we did go to the museum at Ellis Island where our students really felt empowered to learn about their family's history, to celebrate who we are. There's so many ways that we can do that. We can celebrate our kids in the room by each month and celebrate through the poetry, and they write the different settings and the different, like I said, in Jacob Lawrence and, Langston Hughes, we celebrate by recreating different works of art based on a cultural frame, and it is just powerful when that happens.

**Lauren Clouser:**

That's so awesome. That sounds like such a great field trip too.

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Yeah. It's very exciting.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Well and this builds up a little bit too of the social emotional component of the arts as well. Could you speak a little bit about that?

**Kelly Tanzi:**

I think that the socio-emotional component, the way that the arts are the ultimate unifier, there cannot be a bigger example of...you know, we start the year, we talk about who we are, how we are one. You know, we tried it. We have so many ways we are very different. Right? We have many different traditions. We like to bring those to the forefront. But we draw upon who we are, and we have different themes that we do. And sometimes we'll do themes of peace. And the way that those kids come together, our kids in our community come together, and they draw what peace looks like to them.

And we have, again, poetry. Alberto Rios: When Giving Is All We Have. We spoke about that. We talked about, okay. Well, what can we give of ourselves? And, you know, we draw and we create artworks that represent who we are as individuals in our classroom and how we come together in that. We have, also I can see it in my room, we have a garland in here, and each child had to create a piece of that garland. And that was from guidance, actually. That was a piece that we spoke about, you know, they had to come together.

We had to think about how are we all connected. And so there are ways that the arts can just really unify us and just make us have those comfortable and uncomfortable conversations through a third person, and to say, hey. What strikes you most when you look at this work of art? You know, what part makes you feel safe? What part doesn't? And we really have these great conversations based off of paintings sometimes, and it really is fantastic when that happens.

**Lauren Clouser:**

So, Kelly, how can parents continue off of what is going on in the classroom, all these awesome

projects? Is there a way that they can build off of or support these arts-based activities at home?

**Kelly Tanzi:**

I can tell you how important it is and how wonderful and easy it is to become partners with different museums in our city. I have felt so blessed because we have I right now, all you have to do is just kinda pound the pavement a little bit at first, and really, it's just a plethora of choices for the parents. So right now, I can tell you I have relationships with the National Gallery of Art. There's a lady there named Julie Carmine at the National Women's Museum of History. They have remarkable, remarkable teachers' resources. The Folger Theater, they have just reopened...sorry, the Folger Library. Forgive me.

They have just reopened. They just need to go on the websites of Folger Library, National Women's History Museum, the National Art Museum, the Building Museum. They offer so much free material that you would be in awe. And I strongly recommend poetry.org. I receive a poem a day every day. They have poetry sit-ins. It is so exciting, all the things parents can get that are free and that are accessible to their children. The National Museum, the National Building Museum as well, has had some very spectacular examples of architecture that the children can learn from.

And, you know, sadly, we've learned about different parts of our city that have compromised living situations, and it's important for our children to know. And it just really shows you so many different features and so much literature that they can learn while they're at these places and reproduce those different works of art while they're learning about literature. There's this amazing author named Monroe, and she was actually at the Building Museum when I was there recently. And she has a book there, and there are just so many things that you can do in correspondence to that literature that can make it come alive for the children. So I would strongly recommend just reaching out just a little bit to the different museums. And the Phillips Collection is another spectacular one too. They had a great exhibit of Jacob Lawrence, actually. And they will find so much that their children can do.

Every weekend, they also host many different events as well to get the children engaged in a way. Again, that is not threatening, and it's not too literary based at first, let me say. The way that they hook the children is very clever, and the children just get so excited about the connections they make once they start going deeper into books and they see the connection with art.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Yeah. Definitely. Well, those are some great recommendations too for parents, especially somewhere around the corner. I think this will be really helpful.

**Kelly Tanzi:**

I just want to say for people that are not local, again, those websites, they are truly helpful, and they are accessible to anyone, all over the world even. So they love it when parents reach out.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Oh, yeah. Well, we can definitely include those in the show notes for folks. I think that would be great. And then a little bit more generally, especially towards educators, where can they go to learn more about doing these awesome art projects, to support the language arts in their classrooms?

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Well and, again, I would echo the same thing. Again, reach out to the different museums and see what they have available, especially the National Gallery of Art, especially the Women's Museum, the Folger Shakespeare. They have educator nights. They have weekly institutes in the summer. They're not too daunting, and they are just chock full of information that are applicable toolkits for us to use in the classroom. And so Folger National Gallery of Art, Phillips, I would even say the Sackler. Oh, well, maybe not the Hairsthorn, I would say. But, again, I've just gone very deeply with those particular museums, and they have really been extraordinarily helpful.

And Lab School Washington too, I mean, they have lots of great workshops. You know, a lot of schools in the area also offer wonderful ideas about how to incorporate the arts too. But I think these museums in particular, they really do such a spectacular job of giving such great, current, relevant information for us.

**Lauren Clouser:**

Definitely. Well, Kelly, I wanted to thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today about all these awesome art projects and how important they are to help students with learning disabilities to learn, and just for all students to learn and to celebrate different heritages.

**Kelly Tanzi:**

Well, I can't thank you enough for this opportunity, and it has just been so inspiring to be a part of LDA. And I look forward to many more wonderful events and great learning experiences together in the future.

**Lauren Clouser:**

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