

Young Audiences, Inc.
Arts for Learning Lessons 2005-06

Elementary school students in three school districts made substantial gains on literacy tests when they used Arts for Learning Lessons (A4L), a new instructional program that integrates reading and writing with the arts. Twelve hundred and eighty-nine students in grades 3, 4 or 5 at 12 schools in North Brunswick, NJ, Cleveland, OH, and Houston, TX participated in the field trials from October-December, 2006. The A4L group of students achieved substantial gains on pre-post tests of literacy skills and understanding compared to similar students in the same school districts who used the school's standard reading curriculum.

Findings

The independent study comparing student test scores was carried out by external evaluators from WestEd, a leading national education research laboratory based in San Francisco. After the A4L group completed two units of the Lessons for a total of 18 hours of instruction, the gains for these students were:

- a. Twice the gains of the comparison group on questions showing comprehension of a story, including the important skill of making inferences;
- b. Four times the gains of comparison students on questions related to understanding "author's choice," including vocabulary and details that authors use to effectively tell a story;
- c. Six times the gains in using "visualization" – making mental pictures from the information in a story – as a strategy to achieve greater understanding;
- d. Over five times the gains in understanding story elements, including the central problem and the relationship of story events to this problem.

Student gains in A4L classrooms were substantial. The independent analysis showed that results in five of seven primary literacy objectives were statistically significant and cannot be attributed to chance. Results for the other two objectives favored the A4L classrooms but were statistically inconclusive. A4L students at every grade and in every district showed greater gains than the comparison groups from the pre-test to the post-test. Independent researchers who visited both A4L and comparison classrooms confirmed that students experiencing the A4L Lessons had significantly higher levels of engagement in their class work than the comparison groups.

Design

A total of five A4L instructional units have been created using an instructional design developed by an interdisciplinary team from the Learning Sciences Institute at the University of Washington. Each unit features 12-15 Lessons of 30-60 minutes for a total of approximately 9 hours of instruction. The Lessons include teaching and student practice in reading and writing skills, supportive speaking and listening skills, and arts activities that reinforce similar skills and understanding. The arts activities are designed to address challenging literacy objectives drawn from established state and local standards. These skills are vitally important to reading comprehension and writing, but often prove difficult for many students who are taught in traditional ways.

The A4L Lessons bring literacy-through-the arts within reach of all teachers and students. The units are designed for implementation by classroom teachers without requiring the assistance of teaching artists, arts specialists, professional performances or visits to arts venues. Additional learning skills are addressed throughout the lessons including *meta-cognitive* skills (learning how to learn) in order to help students apply what they know to new tasks. The Lessons are designed to be "classroom-ready." They augment a school's regular literacy curriculum and are taught by regular teachers, all of whom have responsibility for literacy instruction but few of whom have special training in the arts.

The Lessons Project is distinguished by its strategy of "leveraging" learning through the arts to meet substantial literacy objectives. Students work in cycles of teacher-guided and self-directed learning: reading selected texts; carrying out arts activities that require them to analyze what they have read; writing their own texts; and creating a presentation through performance or display of ideas and action related to the texts.

Arts activities are carefully designed for their alignment with the literacy objectives of the Lessons. For example, in order to apply their understanding of how the same story may be viewed when told from the perspective of different characters, groups of students create "frozen pictures" using poses and facial expressions that contrast each character's point of view. In another unit, students literally illustrate the importance of selecting just the right

vocabulary to tell a story by creating cartoon panels of different sizes, shapes and perspective. In other units, they use collage to help define and synthesize important events in a person's life as revealed in biography and supplemental tests; they examine inference and theme by working with music composition; and they study the value of a rich vocabulary and of fluency in reading and writing by combining dance and free verse poetry.

Throughout the Lessons students apply literacy skills with increasing independence, using their experience of each "performance" in their analysis and creation of written works. Guidance from their teacher and feedback from their peers spur them to revise their work, which is a critically important learning skill. The Lessons leverage learning in four ways: 1) by reinforcing prior learning, 2) by devising new applications of prior learning; 3) by developing new literacy skills built on prior learning, and 4) by utilizing learning in the arts to strengthen learning in literacy. The variety of arts activities in the Lessons helps teachers individualize the pace and path taken by each student as they pursue common learning objectives.

In contrast to other arts integration efforts that "graft" the arts onto the curriculum of another subject area, Arts for Learning Lessons use the very act of making, interpreting and refining students' artistic expressions to help them understand and apply key elements of a particular story or text, and in the process practice skills that enhance their reading and writing more generally. Lessons are targeted to "sweet spots" in the reading/writing curriculum—areas in which the arts make natural and significant connections. These activities in the arts extend students' engagement with reading and writing by requiring them to observe, analyze with a range of skills, synthesize, create, express, evaluate and revise.

External Assessment

A study of the Lessons' effects on student outcomes was conducted by WestEd. In the fall of 2006, they compared the literacy learning of A4L students with similar students who were taught using their district's regular curriculum. Participating school districts included were in North Brunswick, New Jersey, Cleveland, Ohio, and Houston, Texas. Project coordination and teacher training were provided by the Young Audiences chapter serving each area. The demographics of the locations and school districts were representative of many urban and suburban districts across the country.

Between September and December 2006, 61 teachers and 1,289 public school students in grades 3-5 participated in field-testing and evaluating of the first two units of instruction. The 34 teachers who used the A4L Lessons received 6 hours of intensive professional development from YA chapter and district literacy staff before implementing the Lessons with students in their classrooms. The training capitalized on teachers' knowledge of literacy skills and instruction while introducing specific arts strategies. At each site, the Lessons were related to specific state and local literacy standards. Both the A4L and the comparison teachers followed the regular reading curriculum for their district, and students in both groups received the same amount of instructional time. Classrooms were observed, and student pre and post tests were scored by independent research working with WestEd. The Pre and Post Literacy Assessments, Student Attitude Surveys and classroom observations were scored for both A4L and comparison groups.

Analysis of the findings by WestEd showed greater gains from the Pre to the Post assessments for the A4L groups compared to the comparison groups on all seven primary literacy objectives. The independent researchers reported that A4L classrooms followed the Lessons' design in keeping with the principles of How People Learn issued by the National Research Council (National Academies Press, 2000).

A4L student responses to the Lessons were highly positive, with 56% saying the Lessons were easier or much easier than their regular reading curriculum. This is important because the A4L students learned more than the comparison students yet found the Lessons easier and more enjoyable. This outcome may help motivate students to read on their own, a practice that is an important characteristic of good readers.

Summary

The initial findings of the fall field-tests of the A4L Lessons Project hold promise that leveraging the arts across the elementary literacy curriculum can have substantial, positive effects on student achievement in reading and writing and on students' motivation to read both inside and outside of school. The findings encourage confidence that the Lessons' instructional design, materials, training and classroom practice can be used by general classroom teachers to increase learning of important literacy skills as measured by pre/post-test scores of participating elementary school students.