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Arts integration puts reading, writing and arithmetic into new light

By: Editorial Board

Martin Koenig has taught English at Vashon High School since 1976. He has a reputation for getting things done in the classroom. Yet marching students through even the basics of persuasive writing has become a struggle.

Each year, as much as half of the class fails to complete the final essay.

Mr. Koenig was hungry for a new approach. He got help from Allison Trombley, education director at KDHX, the community radio and media organization.



Allison Trombley of KDHX helps a team of Vashon High School students plan a public service announcement. Mark Cross/Interchange.

The two were introduced through a coalition of local arts and cultural organizations called Interchange. With help from a Ford Foundation grant, it delivers “arts integration” to St. Louis Public Schools.

The focus is not arts enrichment; it’s education reform. Interchange partners use arts education to animate and engage students in core skills, such as reading, writing, math and many forms of critical thinking.

Two premier St. Louis arts organizations — COCA (Center of Creative Arts), which houses Interchange, and Springboard to Learning/Young Audiences — refined the process by taking a practical approach and tailoring it to the needs of each specific class. It begins with a “teaching artist” — a dancer, writer, filmmaker or poet, for example — from one of the coalition partners. The artist is paired with a classroom teacher, who is asked what he is teaching and where he is struggling. Together they develop a plan to break through to the students.

Mr. Koenig’s students aren’t writing a persuasive essay this year, at least not as in past years. They’re producing public-service announcements.

The students have selected topics with care and have intended audiences. They must write and rewrite scripts and plan video shoots to set the stage and convey a call to action.

The students are on comfortable terrain. The abstraction of a “persuasive essay” suddenly assumes a familiar form to a generation bombarded with aggressive advertising and digital media.

But technology didn’t come until the end. Since January, the students have been exposed to principles of persuasion and media literacy. They’ve been working in groups of four to plan the video production.

Cameras weren’t placed into their hands until Thursday; production now is underway.

Arts integration is in its infancy. Programs are in pilot form. They await independent evaluation. Particulars are being documented carefully so that what has worked and what has not can be shared.

But this much already is known: The experimentation costs are modest. The PSA project, including planning and Ms. Trombley’s 12 contacts with Mr. Koenig’s class, cost less than \$1,500.

And the possibilities have excited the imaginations of all the people involved.

Ms. Trombley explores subtle ways to convey how the “plan, do, reflect” process of video production can help the students tackle many tasks in life.

Mr. Koenig wants students to see how the methods they used to develop their PSAs also apply to the essay prompts they will face on standardized tests.

As for the 12 students at Vashon High School, be on the lookout for their PSAs — and note how they used persuasive writing and media skills to influence public opinion on teen pregnancy and domestic violence.

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