



## CONNECTED ARTS NETWORKS QUARTERLY SESSION, NO. 9

# UPLIFTING STORIES TO IMPACT INSTRUCTION

**Connected Arts Networks (CAN)** establishes national virtual Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for educators in dance, music, theatre, visual and media arts. CAN aims to build a sustainable model of professional learning for arts educators in public schools to strengthen their leadership skills and build their capacity to address social-emotional learning and equity, diversity, and inclusion in their arts instruction. Find out more about the project and our partners [here](#).

CAN teachers have been exploring how student feedback impacts their creative process of planning and instruction. This is an opportunity for teachers to receive the most accurate and direct feedback by connecting with students on a personal level. Teachers are considering their students' intersectional identities, as well as their own, while planning curriculum by asking themselves:

- What do my students already know? What do they want to learn?
- What are their inherent skills and strengths?
- What is their cultural background? What is the cultural makeup of their community?
- What injustices might they have seen or faced?
- Where do my students find joy?

CAN teachers use these questions to form their own line of inquiry about how to uplift student stories in the arts classroom in order to improve student engagement. We are doing this through "action research" projects in Professional Learning Communities, where teachers discuss possible strategies with peer teachers, test their "wondering", collect data (student feedback) and reflect on their teaching practice. According to this [brief video](#) by John Spencer, "Action research dissolves the barrier between the participants and the researchers. The teacher actively participates in the situation while also conducting the research."

In this Tip Sheet, current CAN Teacher Leaders share their progress with action research, what they are learning from students, and strategies for getting student feedback. We hope this resource helps you to connect the power of story and feedback to students in your classroom.



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## Martin Rodriguez (he/him/his)

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Educational  
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Martin Rodriguez currently teaches theatre and serves as the arts coordinator at Ramon C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts. He is also an adjunct professor at Pasadena City College and has a history of teaching elementary arts integration. Martin earned his master's degree in theatre education from the University of Northern Colorado and his bachelor's degree in theatre studies/education from the University of Texas at Austin.

**Community:** How does your story or identity impact your teaching? How does who you are as a person translate to your teaching practices in the classroom?

As a teacher of color, I feel responsible for ensuring that identity is embedded in all we learn. I am not only speaking about my own identity, but the many identities of the students in my class. Everyone should feel a need to be represented in the work they do. As someone who only felt represented when they got to college, it is important to me that students feel represented at least as early as high school (hopefully sooner though!).

**Action Research:** In what ways are you connecting your observations of students and their stories to the data you're collecting, and how might that influence changes you make to your instruction?

Social-emotional learning is a huge factor in how and what I teach. From the moment they walk in the door, I am observing my students. Some days, we may just need to play some games or do some ensemble activities. Some days, we may need to adjust the lesson so we can just talk and check in. Also, the students' interests often change the content I use for my lessons. It all should be considered to be effective in engagement in the classroom.

**Impact:** How does receiving feedback from students impact your personal teaching practice? What tools do you use to assess learning?

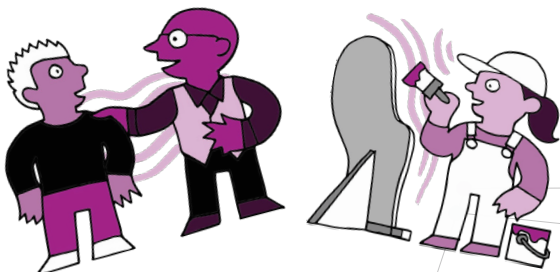
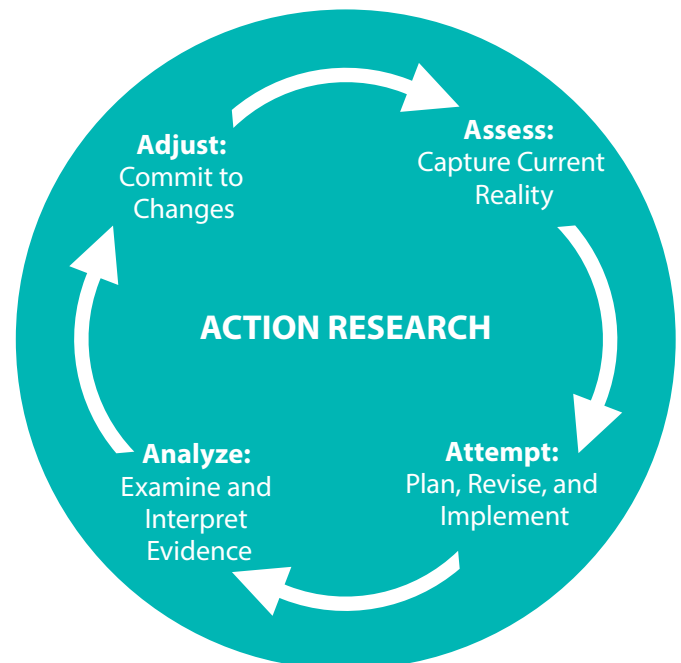
Feedback from students is critical to success in a classroom. My curriculum and lessons are constantly adjusting, shifting, and changing due to student feedback. As educators, we are lifelong learners and should always be finding ways to learn and grow in our practice, instruction, and pedagogy. The first time I asked students for feedback they were surprised. But I wanted to know what else they wanted from a unit and what they liked and did not like. It is THEIR learning, and it also models feedback while creating a community and environment for deeper learning and shifts in it.

**Resources:** What educational resources would you recommend to colleagues related to this topic?

Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process* book is super helpful! Either her book *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, From Dance to Dessert* or as a [PDF on her website](#).

**Reflection:** Why is it important for you to have conversations with students about their personal stories?

It helps you know more about them. It helps strengthen your community, especially when they all share and all listen in. It helps them feel seen and heard, too, which is so important.







## Kimberly Olson (she/her/hers)

Art Educator

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As an art educator, Kimberly Olson has been teaching at a Title I elementary school in New Hampshire for 21 years. She is an Innovation Collaborative Fellow who co-leads the Art & Design Educators affinity group, RA+DE, through the Rhode Island School of Design, where she also earned her BFA and MAT. She holds her administrative license in Curriculum and Instruction. She is also a graduate of NAEA's School for Art Leaders and a Crayola Creativity Ambassador. Kimberly is also a member of NAEA's Cultural Competency in Teaching and Learning Program, the Professional Materials Committee, and Connected Arts Networks as a Teacher Leader. She is passionate about seeing and sharing the inherent connections between art and other disciplines, especially in elevating art as a conduit and exemplar of social-emotional and culturally responsive learning. Kimberly bases learning experiences on the rapport she builds with her students, and by reflecting them in the curriculum and learning environment. Her current action research is rooted in sharing diverse contemporary and living artists with students and by navigating difficult conversations to build and expand students' social awareness as they grow and venture into our diverse, beautiful world. Kimberly is also a published writer and national presenter who works to share and elevate art and all its connections for all our learners.

### **Community:** How does your story or identity impact your teaching? How does who you are as a person translate to your teaching practices in the classroom?

Motivated to counter the default trivialization and less-than stereotypes of my beloved discipline, I began to notice connections between art, literacy, science, math, SEL, and culturally responsive learning, which helped justify and elevate an area I knew was key to whole-child learning. My love for my students builds connections between them and the curriculum based on an established rapport that results in trust. While my love of nature, animals, books, and reading all find their way into my classroom, to make vital connections with my students, I strive to offer a learning environment that reflects my students, not me.

### **Action Research:** In what ways are you connecting your observations of students and their stories to the data you're collecting, and how might that influence changes you make to your instruction?

In making learning relevant and reflective of my students, I share the works of diverse, living artists to engage and inspire them. Specifically, offering artists who share my students' own cultural characteristics via platforms that reflect them as digital natives secures interest more readily. In their VTS responses, I glean vital perspectives—and sometimes misperception, and even damaging stereotypes—fueling difficult conversations with outcomes aimed at increasing students' social awareness, compassion, curiosity, and positive future engagement with their ever-expanding global membership. Development of a student protocol to unpack the origins of some perceptions and redirect deficit-based thinking has resulted from this.

### **Impact:** How does receiving feedback from students impact your personal teaching practice? What tools do you use to assess learning?

My early learners are honest and love to talk! Observing student process, eavesdropping on their conversations during studio inquiry, reading self-assessments, and listening to their peer feedback all offer evidence to improve student experience through adjustments to my own instruction. Surprises abound

through simple whole-group discussion where students respond to shared mentor works or each other, through written artist statements articulating intent, unseen challenges, or even hidden takeaways to “never give up” revealed through Google survey end-of-year exit slips. Formal and informal responses all find their way into revisions, new ideas, perspective, and more learning centered around my actual living breathing learners!

### **Resources:** What educational resources would you recommend to colleagues related to this topic?

- *Cultural Competence NOW: 56 Exercises to Help Educators Understand and Challenge Bias, Racism, and Privilege* by Vernita Mayfield
- *Cultivating Critical Conversations in Art Education* edited by Connie Stewart, Eli Burke, Lisa Hochtritt, and Toya Northington
- *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age* by Katherine May
- *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debby Irving
- *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold (children's book)
- Social Justice Standards:  
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards>

### **Reflection:** Why is it important for you to have conversations with students about their personal stories?

My students are storytellers. Identity and storytelling go hand in hand with learning. When I share my own story, students feel safe to share theirs, rather than code switch to “fit in.” Art is a safe harbor physically and emotionally, and knowing my students' stories helps me develop learning experiences they see themselves in. When they feel safe, they can engage and learn. These vital conversations remind me of the very real intersectionality of even my youngest learners' identities, prompting me to check my own bias and reassure students that I see them and that I love them every single day.





## Meghan Price Wlodarczyk (she/her/hers)

Dance Educator

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Meghan Price-Wlodarczyk brings a wealth of experience and expertise to her role as a dance educator at Ontario High in Ontario, California. She graduated from Columbia College in South Carolina with a BFA in Dance, Performance, and Choreography and a BA in Dance Education Certification K–12. Meghan also holds an MFA from Arizona State University. Meghan is deeply committed to nurturing the next generation of dancers to be well-rounded global citizens. In addition to her academic achievements, Meghan holds a Pilates mat certification, enhancing her holistic approach to dance education and physical wellness. Her teaching journey has taken her across the United States, from private dance studios and fitness centers to public middle and high schools in Arizona, Maryland, South Carolina, and Virginia. Currently, Meghan is committed to growth and collaboration within the ConnectedArts Network (CAN), aiming to establish a sustainable model of professional learning for arts educators.

**Community:** How does your story or identity impact your teaching? How does who you are as a person translate to your teaching practices in the classroom?

My identity informs my teaching by fostering a culture of mutual respect, vulnerability, and growth. By sharing my story, I create a space where students feel safe expressing themselves. I aim to show that learning is a shared journey, not a top-down experience, allowing students to connect with me and each other more meaningfully. Right now, I am dedicated to empowering fellow educators, enhancing their pedagogy, instruction, and leadership skills, all aimed at creating a more enriching and supportive environment for dance educators and students across the country.

**Action Research:** In what ways are you connecting your observations of students and their stories to the data you're collecting, and how might that influence changes you make to your instruction?

I continuously observe student interactions, engagement, and reflections to refine my approach. Through data like reflection journals and surveys, I adjust my teaching methods to enhance their experiences, ensuring the curriculum remains responsive and relevant.

**Impact:** How does receiving feedback from students impact your personal teaching practice? What tools do you use to assess learning?

Student feedback is invaluable in shaping my teaching practice. Tools like digital journals, peer feedback, and surveys help me gauge learning, guiding adjustments in my curriculum and teaching style. This feedback-driven approach enhances students' growth and deepens my connection to their learning journey.

**Resources:** What educational resources would you recommend to colleagues related to this topic?

I recommend Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process*, reflection journals, and peer-feedback protocols. These resources support student-centered feedback, encourage critical thinking, and promote a collaborative learning environment.

**Reflection:** Why is it important for you to have conversations with students about their personal stories?

Conversations about students' personal stories are crucial for building trust, validating their identities, and fostering a community where everyone feels seen. These discussions deepen students' connection to the material and support emotional and social growth.

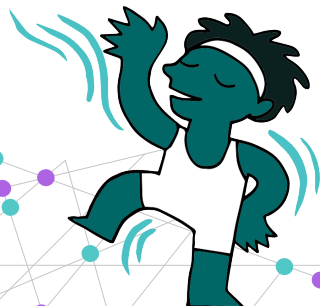
### "Dance is not about the steps."

Years ago I noticed that even when dancers mastered the steps, they didn't have a relationship to the movement that made them feel convicted about it. And without that conviction, they weren't performing it with investment.

So I began posing questions that required the dancers to respond physically. I discovered that dancers who were thus engaged were much more invested as performers, and consequently I was more invested watching them. Soon I was driven to discover questions and structures that would help people find physical answers and stories inside themselves."

**Liz Lerman**

from [www.lizlerman.com](http://www.lizlerman.com)





## Kyla Davis (she/her/hers)

Music Teacher

Ben Franklin Elementary School  
Harrisburg, PA

Kyla Davis currently teaches K–5 music at Ben Franklin Elementary School in Harrisburg, PA. In addition to teaching, she is the director for the Resounding Praise Youth Ensemble, a youth band at her church. Growing up in the capital city, Kyla is a proud alumnus of the Harrisburg School District. After obtaining her bachelor's degree in music education from the illustrious North Carolina Central University, she was privileged to become a teacher in the same district she grew up in. She recently obtained her master's degree in music education from the University of South Mississippi. Kyla is really excited to be participating in the Connected Arts Network. What excites her most is the opportunity to network with and learn from various educators from all over the country.

**Community:** How does your story or identity impact your teaching? How does who you are as a person translate to your teaching practices in the classroom?

Part of my identity is being born and raised in Harrisburg, PA. Being from the same small city and district as some of my students, I am able to understand them in better ways. This proximity allows me to understand some different cultural nuances that appear in the classroom, and I love that I am from the same city as my students. It creates a sense of connection among us. I also bring my identity to the classroom by being my complete self, which gives permission for my students to be their own individual, complete selves. We are silly and fun together! We can be serious and empathetic with each other. I encourage them to be individuals while celebrating our differences in a way that creates and fosters a true community.

**Action Research:** In what ways are you connecting your observations of students and their stories to the data you're collecting, and how might that influence changes you make to your instruction?

I use the information they give me to inform what I use in class. I hear them when they tell me what music they like and listen to in their own culture or personal lives, and I use that music in my lessons. I hear their feedback when asking them at the end of class, "How did today go?" They will tell me what worked and what didn't work, and I adjust for them.

**Impact:** How does receiving feedback from students impact your personal teaching practice? What tools do you use to assess learning?

Getting feedback from my students impacts my teaching practice, as it shows me what my students respond to negatively and positively. This allows me to create a better experience for my students. The tools I use are conversations, surveys, and observations.

**Resources:** What educational resources would you recommend to colleagues related to this topic?

I'd recommend the book *Justice Seekers: Pursuing Equity in the Details of Teaching and Learning* by Lacey Robinson, which includes information about "the many ways that justice is in the details of race, pedagogy, and standards-driven education."

**Reflection:** Why is it important for you to have conversations with students about their personal stories?

I strive to understand who each of them is as a whole person and encourage them to share who they are. Music has always been special in my life. By the time I was in high school, I realized how liberated and joyful music made me feel, and I knew I wanted to give young children the opportunity to feel the same. This led me to become a music educator, and it was a decision I will never regret!



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