



CONNECTED ARTS NETWORKS QUARTERLY SESSION, NO.6 CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

The **Connected Arts Networks (CAN) project** 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 arts educators featured in this tip sheet have had the opportunity to work with Gholdy Muhammad and her five-layered equity model for teaching and learning to develop equitable lesson and unit plans. This model asks educators to consider how they are incorporating the “Five Pursuits” in their curriculum: (1) identity, (2) skills, (3) intellectualism, (4) criticality, and (5) joy. Simultaneously, CAN arts educators have explored their own cultural identities and approaches to learning the cultures and identities of their students.

Gholdy Muhammad is an associate professor of literacy, language, and culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has previously served as a classroom teacher, literacy specialist, school district administrator, curriculum director, and school board president. She studies Black historical excellence in education, intending to reframe curriculum and instruction today. Her model has been adopted across thousands of U.S. schools and districts across Canada. She is the author of *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Model for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*.



How can purposeful practices in culturally responsive education advance students' learning in the arts; guide students to a better understanding of themselves and peers; and engage them in their thinking about power, equity, and antioppression?





Lidia Menniti (she/her/hers)

Visual Arts Educator

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Lidia Menniti is a dedicated art teacher with over 23 years of experience in NYC Public Schools and serves as the arts office lead teacher for visual arts in Queens South districts. She has had the privilege of nurturing the artistic talents of middle school students at MS137Q, known as "America's School of Heroes" in Ozone Park, NY. Her passion for art education led her to attain National Board Certification in Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood, and she has also earned an advanced degree in educational leadership and administration from the College of Saint Rose. Additionally, she holds a Master of Science in Instructional Technology and a Bachelor of Science in Education, specializing in Fine Arts Education with a minor in Art History. Lidia has showcased her students' artwork at Queens Museum of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art's PS Art exhibit in NYC. She is also part of her school's instructional teacher leadership team and plays a pivotal role in shaping curriculum revisions based on the academic needs of students.

Identity: How have you embedded opportunities for students to grow in their knowledge and affirmation of themselves and others in the arts classroom?

By acknowledging and celebrating diverse identities through projects, such as my cardboard self-portrait project inspired by artist Ali Golzad, students have the opportunity to not only express themselves authentically, but also gain a deeper understanding of others. This fosters a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment where students can draw from their own backgrounds and perspectives to create art that reflects their own cultural attributes. In this nurturing and inclusive setting, my students can create work that mirrors their distinct cultural attributes, drawing inspiration from their personal roots and perspectives.

Skills: How do you balance teaching proficiency in visual or performing arts skills while also ensuring that your unit plans are culturally relevant?

By integrating the elements and principles of art within a culturally relevant context, students enhance both technical skills and cultural understanding. I help my students grasp how different cultures achieve visual harmony in their artwork, promoting an awareness of the cultural importance of design and composition in their creations. One project my students enjoy is creating elephant-themed art for our school's Diwali celebration. Students draw from their own cultural backgrounds, establishing meaningful connections with their art.

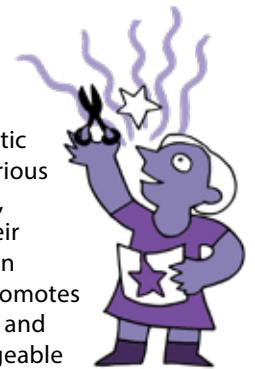
Intellect: In what ways have you witnessed students putting new knowledge into action?

Students have incorporated diverse artistic elements from the various cultures that represent my school's population into their projects, resulting in artwork that is culturally enriched and well-informed. This includes students incorporating elements like hijabs, turbans, and cultural attire when crafting self-portraits or creating a cultural triptych through photography. They enjoy including visual renditions that represent their distinct features or culture.

These experiences have not only enhanced their critical thinking, empathy, and cultural understanding, but it has also deepened their appreciation for diversity. This, in turn, has not only enriched their educational experience, but it has also fostered a more inclusive and respectful classroom atmosphere where students value and honor each other's diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and viewpoints.

Criticality: In what way have you been able to advance students' understanding of equity, power, and antiracism through your arts instruction?

I encourage my students to critically analyze artworks and their societal implications as it relates to the units of study. We delve into how power structures and biases can shape artistic expression and how artists utilize various mediums like painting, photography, videos, and graphic art to convey their emotions and intentions. Fostering an environment that values dialogue promotes understanding of systemic injustices and prejudice, leading to more knowledgeable and empathic perspectives. Students form a socially conscious mindset and become active advocates for justice and equity, impacting not only their learning, but also contributing to a more inclusive and socially aware community within and beyond the classroom.



Joy: Describe how you have used a lesson to spread, elevate, and amplify JOY in the arts.

I've implemented a lesson that encourages self-expression, creativity, and a genuine love for the arts by having my students create an Identity Still Life by using objects that they love. My lessons begin with photography because they love to post photos social media. Students felt more connected to the subject matter, increased their confidence, and exhibited a higher level of engagement. This approach not only honed their artistic abilities, but it also instills a lifelong love of the arts in them, which contributes to their well-being and personal growth.



Edwin Brathwaite (he/him/his)

Dance and Science Educator

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Edwin Brathwaite is a certified science and dance educator who has taught at Meyer Levin Performing Arts School for the past 21 years. A native of Barbados, West Indies, Edwin facilitates New York City-wide dance professional development, *Arts Monday*, and workshops for Dance Educational Laboratory (DEL). He has authored and published several dance unit studies, including a unit titled “Roots of Tap Dance: Soul Rhythms” in DEL and “Tracing Footsteps: Honoring Diverse Voices Through Dance History in NYC,” Grades 6–8 curriculum. He has been honored in his community with several awards, including the Meyer Levin Intermediate School 285 Distinguished Educator Award, and a citation from Senator Roxanne J. Persaud of the 19th Senate District, honoring and recognizing his exceptional contribution to the community he serves. Edwin has performed with Passing Ancestral Knowledge Along Theatre Dance Company and in works choreographed by Elissaveta Iordanova, and he continues to explore his own creativity within the community.

Identity: How have you embedded opportunities for students to grow in their knowledge and affirmation of themselves and others in the arts classroom?

I embedded opportunities for students to grow in their knowledge and affirmation of themselves and others in the arts classroom by developing and writing curriculum that allows students to see themselves and others in the work we do in the classroom. Additionally, we engage in practices that support discussion through self-awareness and the awareness of others, and I affirm students by including images of them at work in the classroom. Students are excited to see themselves at work as well as their classmates, and these images help build our vocabulary and serve as a reflective tool that sews our cultural fabric together.

Skills: How do you balance teaching proficiency in visual or performing arts skills while also ensuring that your unit plans are culturally relevant?

It is no easy task balancing teaching proficiency in performing arts skills while also ensuring that your unit plans are culturally relevant.

However, when this balance is achieved the classroom community thrives. The more students learn about themselves and others through their reflection in unit plans, the more willing they are to take risks to explore their potential and the potential of others. Learning about self and others builds confidence, thereby making teaching proficiency easier because with the knowledge they have learned about themselves, students demonstrate their abilities and cultural practices.



Intellect: In what ways have you witnessed students putting new knowledge into action?

I have witnessed two ways students put new knowledge into action. One, in the ways students are able articulate what they are learning, and two, how to embody text and reproduce text and new ideas in exciting ways. Students are better able to demonstrate and create new arts based on the synthesis of information.

Criticality: In what way have you been able to advance students' understanding of equity, power, and antiracism through your arts instruction?

I have been able to advance students' understanding of equity, power, and antiracism through my arts instruction by engaging them in critical discussions that impact their lives and those of others. Through investigation and discovery in the classroom, students are able to identify injustices that not only impact them and their families, but others in the community as well. Students are encouraged to articulate how their movements and ideas can serve a discussion piece that supports equity, empowers others, and addresses antiracism.

Joy: Describe how you have used a lesson to spread, elevate, and amplify JOY in the arts.

One of the valuable lessons I have learned as a dance education instructor is the importance of criticality, dealing with events that have impacted marginalized groups of people, and celebrating their achievements through resilience. Therefore, when creating work or having discussions, we also discuss the struggles of a people in our movement, but we end by celebrating their achievements—despite inequality and injustice. This practice allows students to learn about inequality and injustice, but also celebrate the achievements marginalized groups make. It is also important to celebrate the joy of each student's contribution to the group success.



Catherine Plichta (she/her/hers)

Director of Instrumental Music

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Catherine Plichta is a graduate of New York University and Empire State College. As a teacher in the NYC DOE for the past 14 years, and a quarterfinalist in the 2016, 2017, and 2024 Grammy Awards, she has worked to bring high-quality music education to students across the entire city. In addition to teaching music, Catherine is an arts facilitator for secondary music and leads professional development for music teachers across NYC. She has also presented in Colorado at the Modern Band Rock Fest and Symposium and the Modern Band Summit, and she has been a guest clinician at the NY State School Music Association (NYSSMA). She has also done extensive work with Music Will (formerly known as Little Kids Rock) and served as a NYC Ambassador and teacher trainer. Catherine's students have performed with celebrities such as Gloria Estefan, Nico & Vinz, and V. Bozeman, and they have even opened at the VH1 Divas Concert featuring Mariah Carey, Patti LaBelle, Vanessa Williams, Chaka Khan, and Teyana Taylor, among other celebrities.

Identity: How have you embedded opportunities for students to grow in their knowledge and affirmation of themselves and others in the arts classroom?

I have spent time creating and cocreating units that expose students to a wide variety of music representing a variety of cultures found in our school community and beyond. Choosing diverse repertoire with examples of many different genres of music allows students to gain even greater insights into their own identities and the identities of others. In addition to utilizing repertoire that fall into the state-approved canon, we incorporate other genres such as palos, bachata, salsa, merengue, reggaeton, soca, calypso, reggae, and more. We connect deeper with the identities of students through blending performance with culture.

Skills: How do you balance teaching proficiency in visual or performing arts skills while also ensuring that your unit plans are culturally relevant?

I can teach skills like technique and note reading through any piece of music because different repertoire allows students to explore different skills required by that piece. By studying varied repertoire, students are able to explore the differences between various genres of music and identify what makes each genre unique, as well as the similarities between certain genres. This can increase communication, perspective taking, and collaboration among students as they become engaged in conversations around their own experiences with these different genres of music by sharing their own cultural backgrounds and alternating between playing in different genres of music.

Intellect: In what ways have you witnessed students putting new knowledge into action?

I have watched as students explored the ethnomusicological and historical aspects of how music was influenced by the African diaspora and how unique elements of musical genres evolved. This broadened their personal connection to the music we listen to and had them think more critically about which genres of music are omitted by various

gatekeepers in music education. They gain deeper understanding of the differences between approximation, interpretation, and cultural appropriation.

Criticality: In what way have you been able to advance students' understanding of equity, power, and antiracism through your arts instruction?

We approach criticality by acknowledging the systems of oppression that exist and asking questions, such as "Why are some songs in the NYSSMA manual and others not?" and "Who determines what songs are included?" These types of questions focus on equity and power, but to be antiracist you need to actively work against racist practices. We then move toward questions like "How might we be able to include other diverse instrumentation into NYSSMA such as steel pan?" or "What is the process that exists to add additional repertoire to the manual?" This gives students the information needed to become agents of change.



Joy: Describe how you have used a lesson to spread, elevate, and amplify JOY in the arts.

When we were looking at the complex differences between the annexation of Hawaii by the United States and the colonization of Puerto Rico, we explored two different songs; "Mele Kalikimaka" by Robert Alex Anderson and "Feliz Navidad" composed by José Feliciano. Despite the tumultuous pasts of both nations, this music shines a light on the humanity and joy that is found in even the most oppressive and difficult times. Students had the opportunity to explore the persistence of the human spirit in the face of adversity. They experienced the joy that comes with celebrating and making music together.



Tina Barone (she/her/hers)

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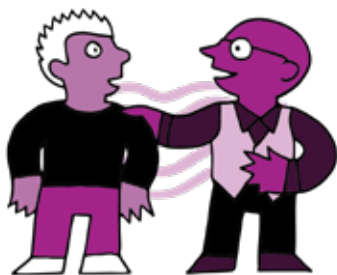
Tina Barone is a New York City native boasting 2 decades of teaching expertise. Armed with a theater performance degree and a master's degree in elementary education from Wagner College, Tina's mission is to unearth the potential within each student. Her classroom thrives on diversity, creativity, and cultivating interactive learning experiences. Beyond academics, Tina imparts life skills and values through community engagement and workshops. With an unshakable belief in the untapped potential of all, Tina's influence extends well beyond her 20 years in education, leaving behind an inspiring legacy of empowerment and growth.

Identity: How have you embedded opportunities for students to grow in their knowledge and affirmation of themselves and others in the arts classroom?

In using Ghody Muhammad's "Five Pursuits" to plan units, I have found ways to embed identity work into my theatre curriculum for Grades K-5. Being in an elementary school, self-discovery is an essential building block in early childhood development. Identity has shown up in various ways, from acting out likes and dislikes in mime work, to writing adaptations of Shakespeare to make it relevant to student social issues, to choosing jobs within the theatre that speak to students' individual strengths and creative sensibilities, all while collaborating with peers whose opinions, strengths, and traits differ from their own.

Skills: How do you balance teaching proficiency in visual or performing arts skills while also ensuring that your unit plans are culturally relevant?

I have found that using artists of color and multicultural references as exemplars has been a tremendous asset when teaching theatre technique and skills. It has given my students a very clear picture of the quality or level of artistry I hope they can achieve. By providing background about each artist, it makes them look at artworks in a new way, to think critically about the work they are creating, and to use their own voice and personal backgrounds to enhance the work. It enhances the skills being covered in each unit, thus allowing more students to reach mastery of the standard.



Intellect: In what ways have you witnessed students putting new knowledge into action?

Knowledge is power! The more you know on diverse topics, the more well-rounded you become. I feel using the "Five Pursuits" in my curriculum design has led to increased knowledge acquisition for ALL students. By exposing them to not only theatre artists, but also artists from other disciplines, I have seen them gain knowledge and ask deeper questions and engage in richer discussions. And the biggest payoff of all is that the creative process has more meaning to students, and the art they create is more complex!

Criticality: In what way have you been able to advance students' understanding of equity, power, and antiracism through your arts instruction?

I have simply started the conversation. In years past in our school community, these weren't topics that were discussed or taught. I have opened the door, so to speak, by introducing artists of color into my units that are relevant to the skills being taught, introducing their backgrounds and how they have influenced their artmaking, having students take on jobs and leadership roles within the classroom, and by having discussions on difficult topics.

Joy: Describe how you have used a lesson to spread, elevate, and amplify JOY in the arts.

Any time you have the opportunity to create something in a collaborative setting, JOY ensues! By using the "Five Pursuits" to plan units, and by centering my curriculum around student voice and choice, the students have felt more empowered and have taken a bigger interest in their own learning! As a result, their confidence has grown, and so has their willingness to engage in the creative process of theatre making. They are proud of what they put out into the world and support one another while doing it, and that is a beautiful and rare thing that has brought me joy!