



# How Connected Arts Learning Can Expand Our View of the Impacts of Arts Education

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**Theme(s):** connected learning; arts education

## What is the Issue?

For decades, arts educators and researchers have engaged in a debate over the value and purpose of arts education—for example, whether the arts are valuable as a way to support academic achievement in other subject areas (e.g., Guhn et al., 2020) or for their own sake (e.g., Winner & Hetland, 2000).

Both viewpoints help us consider the long-term impacts of out-of-school arts education on youth lives. However, arts education has even broader impacts on youth learning than those typically described by either framing, including improved cognitive processes such as executive functioning (Holochwost, 2017), increased compassion for others (Bowen & Kisida, 2019), and civic and pro-social outcomes (e.g., Catterall, 2009; Catterall et al., 2012).

This broader understanding of the benefits of arts education is also reflected in the work being done around connected learning (Ito et al., 2013, 2020). The field of connected learning investigates how young people build their interests and identities as they learn over time. Connected learning theory describes how educators can create meaningful learning opportunities by building relationships, centering learning on youth interests, and providing opportunities linked to real-world issues and communities.

Our work brings together connected learning and arts education to create a framework we call connected arts learning. By attuning to the interplay between interest, relationships, and opportunities, we believe that arts educators can take meaningful steps to connect programs to youths' home lives, families and cultural communities, and future aspirations.

## What Does a Connected Learning Framework Add to the Conversation on Arts Education?

Through our research, we found that a connected learning lens expands the view of the purpose and possibilities for arts education experiences. It opens discussion around three major components of arts learning anchored in connected learning theory: youth interest, relationship-building, and future opportunities.

- *Building on Youth Interest.* A connected learning lens amplifies the importance of identity and interest in arts education and argues that arts learning should connect to youth home life, cultural heritage, and digital spaces. Importantly, this framework shifts the conversation from *getting youth interested* in the arts that educators or others with power deem valuable, and toward *building on the interests young people already have*.
- *Leveraging and Fostering Relationships.* Connected learning focuses not only on the relationships among members within a program, but also their relationships with others in the community, such as families, audience members, and arts professionals within the field. A connected learning model also encourages educators to create intergenerational arts learning opportunities for families that explore their heritage.

### Why It Matters

This article expands the discussion about the purpose of arts learning to incorporate a full range of learning outcomes beyond the academic or disciplinary-specific to include civic, occupational, cultural, and social outcomes, both for individuals and communities. A **connected arts learning** framework knits together common elements of arts education by applying understandings drawn from connected learning theory.

- *Fostering Opportunities for Youth*. Connected arts learning describes the value of arts learning for youths' careers. This perspective illustrates work as not only having economic benefits, but also as part of what it means to live a fulfilling life and to do good work in the world. This reframing of the role of occupation pushes art educators to consider how they can broker pathways to youth professional opportunity. Connected arts learning also draws our focus toward how art learning that connects to youth interests and community creates meaningful learning opportunities.

### Source Article

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## Implications for Research & Practice

Viewing arts education through a connected learning lens allows us to identify overlooked, yet critical, areas of research that can inform decisions around policies and practices of arts experiences. Such a shift encourages arts researchers and educators to:

- design for the key relationships, supports, and resources to help young people thrive in their communities and careers.
- involve mentors, families, and youth themselves in the design of learning programs.
- help youth build their networks and direct them toward future opportunities.
- build networks across a region (e.g., schools, museums, afterschool programs, families).

## Our Methods

We reviewed arts education literature that referenced elements and design principles of connected learning, such as youth interest-driven learning; academic, career, or civic opportunities; sponsorship of youth interests; and connections across locations (e.g. home, community, school, online). We drew from 56 articles from the [Arts Education Partnership's ArtsEdSearch database](#) and 12 articles from the [Connected Learning Alliance website](#). We selected these databases because they are key portals of dialogue within both the arts and connected learning fields, making them a productive starting point for re-theorizing arts education from a connected learning lens.

## Read Next

We brought the findings of this literature review together with case studies and interviews with leading arts educators to develop a connected arts learning framework, outlined in the Wallace-funded report, *The Connected Arts Learning Framework: An Expanded View of the Purposes and Possibilities for Arts Learning*. This report includes a description of what CAL is and looks like in practice, illustrations of five commonly used CAL approaches, and offers practitioners and funders tools for incorporating CAL into program design.

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