



Activating Arts Learning: Elements of Instruction

Introduction to Elements of Instruction

Elements of Instruction

Elements of Instruction are the teaching techniques, strategies, and resources that instructors draw upon in the moment as they engage young people in powerful and personally relevant arts learning experiences. While we sometimes talk about arts teaching and learning in broad terms, it's important to remember each of these experiences is unique. When we observe closely, we notice the nuance in how instructors and young people engage with one another and their environments to make arts learning meaningful. The theory of change spotlights twelve elements of instruction that our staff and advisors identified as most significant to supporting our priority Youth Outcomes. While developing the theory of change, we reviewed prominent pedagogical theories and frameworks to incorporate additional ideas into our thinking. We've brought together ideas from across these theories and frameworks to demonstrate the wide range of instructional techniques and strategies that facilitators can choose from to support meaningful arts learning. You're encouraged to check out these frameworks in more detail if any of them seem especially relevant to you; we've prioritized online resources to make it easier to explore them further.

Supported Youth Outcomes

AEC staff and Advisory Board members, arts educators and teaching artists, school administrators and teachers, and arts organization leaders who contributed to the theory of change examined

relationships between its components. They were asked to identify the Elements of Instruction that are most important for each Youth Outcome featured in the theory of change. The Youth Outcomes most frequently associated with each Element of Instruction are listed here.

Culturally Responsive Arts Education: AEC

One of the frameworks we reviewed and compared to the Elements of Instruction was AEC's own Leadership Academy curriculum. In 2019, AEC staff collaborated with four experts in [culturally responsive arts education](#)—Celeta Hickman, Shabaka Perkins, Dameta Skinner, and IAsia Thomas—to revise the curriculum for AEC's Leadership Academy program for arts educators. The curriculum is built around three focus areas: culturally responsive arts education, leadership, and action planning. Each focus area lists critical knowledge and skills that educators are expected to develop as they participate in Leadership Academy. The ideas listed here are drawn from skills included in the culturally responsive arts education framework in the program's curriculum.



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Focusing on young people's assets and strengths

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning validates and affirms young people.

Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: engages youth in activities that uncover existing strengths, talent, and expertise• Students and instructors: view young people as partners in learning and resources in the community
Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: emphasizes strengths, highlighting competencies over deficiencies and resilience over pathology; helps students create islands of competence, recognizing when students express poor self-concept and negative thinking associated with trauma and providing opportunities to create a positive future picture of themselves• Students and instructors: recognize each other's strengths and resilience; view students as knowledge creators and experts of their own experiences
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-awareness and feelings of self-efficacy• Creative entrepreneurship and career pathways• Motivation to learn• Self-expression

Self-assessment and reflection

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning allows time for young people to take a step back and think deeply about their work—individually and collectively.

<u>Growth Mindset</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students and instructors: give students feedback on their learning histories, pointing out the progress they have made in social, emotional, or academic areas
<u>Project-Based Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction: incorporates opportunities for reflection through classroom culture and dialogue, project journals, scheduled formative assessment, discussions at project checkpoints, and public presentations of student works; invites students to give and receive constructive peer feedback to improve project processes and products, guided by rubrics, models, and formal feedback and critique protocols
<u>Social Emotional Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction: incorporates opportunities for self-reflection Students: are encouraged to actively think about their own work and think about how to improve their work on the basis of their self-assessment
<u>Teaching Artistic Behavior</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction: engages students in discussions with peers and sharing sessions for assessment; incorporates ongoing formative self-assessment through critique, reflection, rubrics, artist statements, photographic evidence, and portfolios
<u>Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students and instructors: provide feedback to help each other grow and change (e.g., pointing out what students do well, facilitating peer feedback)
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-awareness and feelings of self-efficacy Self-expression Artistic understanding and skills Problem-solving skills

Choice and creative expression

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning gives young people the freedom to tell stories that are important to them.

Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: involves youth in decision making, offering them significant voice in shaping their projects, the program, and—when appropriate—the organization; is youth driven, encouraging young people to set and monitor personal goals; offers opportunities for youths to partner with adults
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages students to drive their own learning; facilitates child-directed learning; provides opportunities for youth to practice leadership
Culturally Responsive Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: communicates through language, gestures, and expressions that students' opinions are important
Maker Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages youth to express ideas via construction
Project-Based Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: provides students with a say in the project, which creates a sense of ownership
Social Emotional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: invites students to provide meaningful input into academic content and how the academic content is learned
Teaching for Artistic Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: invites students to choose what to work on, giving them control of media, technique, and subject matter
Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: strives to maximize student choice and control • Instructors: share power and decision making with students (e.g., involving students in creating or revising policies, assignments, and grading rubrics)
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-expression • Motivation to learn • Self-awareness and feelings of self-efficacy • Artistic understandings and skills

Access to authentic artistic resources and tools

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning offers young people the chance to experiment with high-quality materials, supplies, and equipment to create across a variety art forms.

Maker Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: provides access to materials and tool, which are a means not only to enable creating things but also to make visible the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of young makers
Teaching for Artistic Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: provides access to a range of tools, materials, and resources
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Artistic understandings and skills• Creative entrepreneurship and career pathways• Understanding of culture and heritage

Cultural relevance

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning uplifts and celebrates diverse artistic traditions, highlighting artists and art forms that young people can relate to.

Arts Ed Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: is presented from the perspective of oppressed peoples; offers connections with local artists, makers, and craftspeople who practice within different traditions; presents positive and reflective images and models; takes joy in the excellence of underrepresented art forms and artists
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: examines historical context in the arts; is purposeful about whose history and through what lens history is presented, choosing representation over omission; presents affirming narratives and disrupts harmful ones
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: Pittsburgh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: engages in conversations about the value and beauty of African Diasporic culture; offers opportunities for real skill development in the arts of the African Diaspora; partners with artists to develop an instructional climate that promotes a positive racial identity; promotes a positive racial identity to serve as a counter-narrative in an environment that often communicates to African American children, and their teachers, that they are less than capable; provides children with examples of how African Americans have achieved despite racism and oppression; uplifts Afro-centric and African American-centric traditions
Culturally Responsive Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: complements the traditional curriculum with examples, newspaper clippings, articles, song lyrics, plays, comics, video games, and other resources that reflect experiences, characters, settings, and themes students can relate to; encourages students to explore their personal heritage through art; honors and accommodates home languages, including advocating for translation services and resources in various languages; validates students' lived realities, cultural identities, and heritage
Project-Based Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: speaks to students' own cultures and identities

Cultural relevance (continued)

Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: includes policies and practices are responsive to issues of diversity and oppression (e.g., asking for and using preferred names and pronouns)• Instructors: strive to be culturally competent and to understand people in the context of their life experiences and cultural background
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Civic engagement• Understanding of culture and heritage• Self-awareness and feelings of self-efficacy• Relationship building skills

Treating young people with care and respect

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning takes place in safe, nurturing environments where young people and their instructors trust and accept one another.

Arts Ed Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: creates a safe space for youth to share personal circumstances and struggles; encourages young people to work in teams; is integrated with art therapy and school counseling
Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: creates an environment in which young people feel protected, nurtured, and secure; engages youth in activities that foster mutual trust and respect; engages youth in community- and team-building activities; engages youth in rituals that promote a sense of belonging; responds to the larger context in which it functions by recognizing all the needs of the young people it serves
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors: exhibit love to students so they love each other; get to know children; invite students to share how they're feeling and respond to them as human beings
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: Pittsburgh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: engages artists in the building of relationships between the child and the school to support developing caring relationships with children
Culturally Responsive Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages students to reflect on their own experience with bias; helps students develop a sense of responsibility in addressing mistreatment, prejudice, injustice, and bullying when they encounter it; models how to engage across difference and embodies respect for social, cultural, and linguistic differences; promotes respect for students' differences
Social Emotional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors: demonstrate care and concern for students by asking students questions (academic and nonacademic) and following up with students when they have a problem or concern • Instructors and students: develop shared norms and values and consistently apply strategies to reinforce them in the classroom

Treating young people with care and respect (continued)

Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: acknowledges, normalizes, and discusses the difficult feelings that can arise when learning about trauma and its victims; allows students to not participate, demonstrating respect for limits; creates an atmosphere that is respectful of the need for safety, respect, and acceptance; discusses difficult material that has been presented, allowing students to process, reorient, and regain emotional distance; ensures the physical and emotional safety of students in all traditional, virtual, and field settings, including feeling safe in individual and group interpersonal interactions (e.g., providing content warnings prior to discussing sensitive topics); minimizes possibilities of re-traumatization and maximizes possibilities of successful educational outcome; regularly checks in with students during class to help determine how students are doing emotionally and whether adjustments are needed; responds to conflict with conversation • Instructors: get to know young people personally
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship building skills • Civic engagement • Self-awareness and feelings of self-efficacy • Motivation to learn • Understanding of culture and heritage

Collaboration and sharing

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning invites young people to work together with others and take part in something bigger than themselves.

Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: offers opportunities for youths to engage in positive interactions with adult mentors and role models and their peers; provides opportunities for one-on-one time with adult leaders
Maker Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages engagement with people, not just materials; provides space for youth to gather, plan, communicate, and share ideas; utilizes open spaces with ample table space and mobile furniture; utilizes spaces with whiteboards or where entire table surfaces are covered in whiteboard material, paper, or blackboard paint
Project-Based Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: helps create a learning community, where students and teachers discuss what is being learned, how it is learned, what are acceptable standards of performance, and how student performance can be made better
Social Emotional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages students to engage in cooperative learning in which they work together toward a collective goal with emphasis on positive interdependence, individual accountability, promoting one another's successes, applying interpersonal and social skills, and group processing (the group discusses progress toward achieving a goal); encourages students to engage in peer and cross-age tutoring
Teaching for Artistic Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: nurtures a community of artists—when everyone is working on different things, there is less tendency to compare oneself to others and youth are more likely to celebrate others' successes, coach each other, discuss artwork, share materials, and choose to work with others on particular projects
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship building skills • Civic engagement • Understanding of culture and heritage

Real-world connections

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning explores projects inspired by issues that matter and connects young people to people and places in their communities.

Arts Ed Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: connects the ways that creative industry can lead to personal financial growth opportunities, which also translate into economic vitality in communities; connects to arts institutions to build professional experience and networking opportunities; connects with public art and urban planning; engages learners in creating murals and other public art; explores a variety of careers in the arts (in front of and behind the scenes); helps youth claim and improve shared spaces (e.g., school beautification, collaborative murals); provides culturally relevant models in wide variety of career fields; provides opportunities for students to earn money from their creations; provides students with access to internships, independent study, post-secondary classes; responds to an authentic need or problem
Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: deals with local, national, global, and historical issues; engages youth in community service, entrepreneurial opportunities, and part-time jobs
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: Pittsburgh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: grounds programs in real-world projects that exemplify challenges and opportunities that are germane to the lives of African American children in Pittsburgh
Culturally Responsive Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: helps students see how the knowledge and skills they learn in school are valuable for their lives, families, and communities; requires learners to identify complex, real-world issues they encounter in their daily lives and propose solutions for these problems
Maker Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: responds to an authentic human need or problem; seeks real-world examples everywhere and highlights diverse examples; provides youth with access to video and audio recording equipment, cameras, and computers to document their work to share with their peers and the larger community

Real-world connections (continued)

<u>Project-Based Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: explores problems like those faced by people in the world outside of school; explores problems that have real impact on others, such as addressing a need in learners' school or community; speaks to concerns, interests, and issues in students' lives; uses real-world processes, tasks and tools, and performance standards
<u>Social Emotional Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: engages learners in community service
<u>Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: connects students with appropriate peer and professional resources to help them succeed academically, personally, and professionally (e.g., inviting guest speakers)
Supported Youth Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic engagement • Understanding of culture and heritage • Creative entrepreneurship and career pathways

Open-ended inquiry

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning asks young to people to explore questions that don't have easy answers.

Project-Based Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: encourages sustained inquiry—when confronted with a challenging problem or question, students ask questions, find resources to help answer them, then ask deeper questions
Social Emotional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: asks open-ended questions that encourage students to elaborate on their own thinking and on the thinking of their peers
<i>Supported Youth Outcomes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem-solving skills• Self-expression

Experimentation and risk-taking

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning encourages young people to try new things, treating times when things don't go as planned as opportunities for discovery.

Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: encourages young people to take risks within a supportive environment
Growth Mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: communicates taking risks and asking questions are safe in the classroom; fosters a community in which classmates are respectful when someone makes a mistake; responds to mistakes as teachable moments and chances to learn, not signs of deficit
Maker Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: promotes rapid prototyping and revisiting and iterating on ideas
<i>Supported Youth Outcomes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem-solving skills• Self-expression

Emphasizing process over product

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning focuses attention on the growth that young people can experience through the creative act itself, not just the result.

Arts Ed Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is of sufficient length (multi-week, multi-month, multi-year) to allow youth to see their learning all the way through
Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: requires youths to commit to high but realistic levels of time and effort
Maker Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: emphasizes process over product
Social Emotional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages student effort and work • Instructors: restate what the student did and what that student needs to do to improve
Teaching for Artistic Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: encourages students to experiment and practice to learn from their work—not every piece can or should be a masterpiece, sometimes artists practice to improve their skills
Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: ensures consistency in practice to minimize disappointment (e.g., require drafts in order to provide ungraded feedback and to catch problems before they result in failure of an assignment)
<i>Supported Youth Outcomes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem-solving skills • Artistic understandings and skills

Clear and challenging expectations

Description: Powerful and personally relevant arts learning urges young people to set ambitious goals and provides supports when needed to help achieving them.

Creative Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: features culminating activities—such as final performances, exhibitions, readings, etc.—which create safe opportunities by challenging youths to meet goals, adhere to timelines, and create products they are proud to share with audiences; provides clear expectations; sets high expectations for growth and learning; provides the resources to ensure success
Culturally Responsive Arts Education: AEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors: adopt a mindset of expecting student success
Culturally Responsive Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: ensures all students have access to a rigorous core curriculum • Instructors: adopt the view that all students are capable of academic success; model high expectations for all students (e.g., teachers use eye contact and proximity with both high-achieving and struggling learners)
Growth Mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: engages students in a challenging curriculum, helping them believe that—through deep thinking, analysis, and perseverance—they have the capacity to succeed academically; invites students to take on and ultimately succeed with challenging tasks, engaging in productive struggle; is scaffolded so all students can be successful with rigorous tasks; removes obstacles to success or helps find another path to complete a task
Project-Based Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction: invites students to perform or present their work in public—when students have to present or display their work to an audience beyond the classroom, the performance bar raises
Social Emotional Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors: provide meaningful and challenging work; set academic expectations based on belief that all students can and will succeed

Clear and challenging expectations (continued)

<u>Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction: makes expectations clear and ensures consistency in practice (e.g., articulating clear policies and implementing them consistently); makes expectations clear to minimize disappointment (e.g., providing detailed assignment sheets and grading rubrics)• Instructors: act as allies rather than adversaries of student success (e.g., implementing policies and practices that foster success rather than “weed out” weak students)
<i>Supported Youth Outcomes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem-solving skills• Creative entrepreneurship and career pathways• Motivation to learn