

Creative Arts as a Bridge for Diverse Learners

Creative arts can be an inclusive, low-pressure, and culturally responsive way to engage students—particularly neurodiverse youth and English Language Learners (ELLs). Art and music allow students to communicate, process, and connect in ways that transcend language. With thoughtful adaptations, creative arts can also serve as a powerful tool for informal assessment.

How to Adapt Creative Arts Activities

- **Who is the activity for?** – Consider the student’s developmental level, language ability, and sensory preferences.
- **What are their needs or interests?** – Think about what motivates them—storytelling, movement, color, texture, music.
- **What is the goal?** – Are you encouraging expression, building community, supporting regulation, or observing strengths?
- **How can you adjust the structure?** – Use visual aids, pre-cut shapes, shorter timeframes, structured prompts, or flexible materials.
- **Can students work individually or collaboratively?** – Offer options to accommodate different comfort levels.

Adapting Creative Arts for Neurodiverse Youth and ELLs

- **Visual Supports:** Use picture instructions, color-coded steps, or visual schedules.
- **Modeling:** Demonstrate each step clearly and repeat as needed.
- **Language Access:** Use simple language, gestures, or translations where possible. Allow nonverbal participation.
- **Sensory Sensitivity:** Offer choices in materials (dry vs. wet, soft vs. textured) and allow breaks.
- **Flexible Participation:** Allow students to observe before participating or offer alternative ways to engage.
- **Relationship Building:** Pair students intentionally for peer support or co-creation.

Creative Arts as an Assessment Tool

Creative arts activities provide insight into:

- Emotional regulation and self-expression
- Communication preferences (verbal, visual, musical)
- Peer interaction and collaboration skills
- Sensory preferences and motor coordination
- Flexibility, attention, and ability to follow directions

These observations can inform classroom supports and deepen educator understanding.

Sample Activities and Inclusive Adaptations

Elementary: Partner Magnetile Build

Students work in pairs to build a magnetile structure, taking turns or deciding together where to place each piece.

Adaptations:

- Use visual turn-taking cards or a timer
- Pair nonverbal or shy students with expressive peers
- Allow for parallel play or observation before full participation
- Offer alternative materials (e.g., large blocks for students with motor needs)

Middle School: Emotion Mask Making

Students create two-sided masks—one side showing an emotion they feel inside, the other how they often appear to others.

Adaptations:

- Provide emotion visuals or vocabulary sheets
- Offer pre-cut templates and a range of accessible materials
- Allow students to use color, symbols, or patterns if drawing faces feels difficult
- Provide options to create digitally or collaboratively

High School: “My Story in Sound and Image”

Students choose a theme (e.g., belonging, identity, strength) and express it through a combination of visual art and sound/music clips.

Adaptations:

- Allow written, visual, or musical representation (or combination)
- Permit use of personal devices for music selection
- Offer alternative themes or prompts related to personal interests
- Encourage paired or small group storytelling for ELLs or students who prefer collaborative work

With thoughtful facilitation, creative arts can create safe entry points for expression and assessment, helping all students—especially those who are often overlooked—feel seen, heard, and understood.