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# Introduction for Teachers

## by Lydia Ossorgin

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The initial idea for the Integrated Arts Class was proposed by Karen Ladegard, IASD Thematic Teaching Project Coordinator. This class was offered to middle school and high school students across the district and delivered by a 50 min. VTC class that met daily during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester 2012-2013. The goal was not a small one: students were to write a musical based on local history or a traditional story and then travel to perform it together in their villages. Its success depended on the willingness of on-site teachers and adults to collaborate in providing the best experience for students. Sixteen students signed up for this class (or discovered that they were placed in it) and four schools participated: Holy Cross School, Takotna School, McGrath School and Top of The Kuskokwim School in Nikolai. Teachers attended the VTC class with their students and their involvement was the key to this project's success! It was a great experiment and a wonderful experience for me as lead teacher. The following outlines the developmental stages of this class.

### Integrated Arts: Writing and Performing a Musical

1. **READINGS:** Three stories were selected to read from from “The Nikolai Reader”: *The First Airplane*, *The Mail and Dog Teams*. These stories (brief narrations) were told in the Upper Athabascan Language and later translated into English. Time period is 1920-1930’s in the Upper Kuskokwim Area.
2. **WRITINGS:** After 3 weeks of classes (writing character development, practicing writing dialogue and scene development), a fictional story based on *real events* and *real places* unfolded. Compelling questions that would unify the story were identified: *Is change a good thing? How is change integrated into a way of life?*
3. **SCRIPT PLANNING AND SCENE DEVELOPMENT:** During a teachers’ meeting in mid-February, we decided that the play, *Miska and The First Airplane*, would be written in four scenes. Each school would research and write a scene in isolation because of time constraints! (NOTE: *The last half of February, March and first 2 weeks in April were dedicated to points 3-8. The challenge was getting everyone to meet at the same time with Iron Dog, Iditarod, Spring Break, Cultural Days and other blocks previously scheduled on the calendar.*)
  - Scene 1: *On The Trail* (McGrath students)
  - Scene 2: *The Old Nikolai Graveyard* (Nikolai students)
  - Scene 3. *At The Lonestar Roadhouse* (Takotna students))
  - Scene 4: *Big River During Fish Camp* (Holy Cross students)
4. **PRODUCTION TEAM:** A Student Productions Team was named: Student Director, Student Editor, and Student Art and Music Directors. They worked outside of class with me.
5. **MUSIC:** Research on the music in that area confirmed what I had been told by elders alive in or around the time period. Western



music and dancing came with the establishment of Road Houses and gold mines along the Iditarod Trail. A common story I heard is that the owner of a Roadhouse would stock instruments, sell them to the Native Alaskans and then teach them how to play. Country/Western music was introduced through the Road Houses. Students wrote lyrics.

6. SCRIPT AND REVISIONS: The initial script was read aloud during a Reader's Theater. This worked quite well during the VTC class. We had a total of five Reader's Theaters and six drafts prior to our first rehearsal. The student director worked on stage directions. (NOTE: These were tossed out for actual performances. Each site presented *stage challenges!* ) The student art and music directors identified places in the script to include dances. The whole group decided on costumes. Parts were assigned to students.

7. DESIGNING A PORTABLE STAGE: I made the initial designs, settled on one and submitted it for rigorous questioning and approval by the Student Production Team!

8. SCENERY BACKDROPS: Each site designed and painted 4- 4' x 8' banners to depict their scenes.

9. FIRST MEETING OF WHOLE GROUP: In mid-April, we met together for 3 days in McGrath. We worked with a professional songwriter, tested the portable stage, and went through the script. Students played drama games, worked on voice projection, sang and danced.

10. VTC REHEARSALS: In preparation for each class, students worked on memorizing their parts, songs and dances. The first week and a half in May, the cast went through the whole script with songs and dance. They also made props to have ready at each site.

11. FOUR PERFORMANCES, FOUR VILLAGES (mid-May)

#### MY THOUGHTS:

- The Integrated Arts class was the first VTC class I taught. Joyce Gardella, Integrated Arts teacher in Nikolai gave me helpful and relevant suggestions with encouragement throughout the class. If a teacher is considering leading VTC instruction for the first time, I suggest observing a VTC class that is delivered by an experienced teacher like Joyce.
- The use of Google Drive to create documents was invaluable. It enabled me to spend time outside of class more efficiently. For example, through Google Drive, the student editor and I could work on a revision together in real time. I could adapt my schedule to her availability. Also, I used Google Drive to gather examples of student writings. Later, I organized these with hyperlinks or as examples in lessons for reference in this thematic unit.
- Finally, by the end of the Integrated Arts class, it was clear during the performances, that the class, the script, the songs, the dances, and the local history belonged to the students. Their performances got better each time and their personal stake in their own work went deeper.



*“It is a good time to be alive!”*

from *Miska and The First Airplane*  
an IASD student production, 2013