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Exploring the Cross-Disciplinary Integration of Rugby and Arts Education in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: As the boundaries of disciplinary education continue to blur, integrating physical education with arts instruction has emerged as a promising frontier in higher education. This study investigates the potential of rugby — a sport grounded in teamwork, bodily coordination, and strategic performance — as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary collaboration in art universities. Drawing on global data and case studies from institutions in China, the UK, and Australia, the paper explores how rugby can enhance somatic literacy, emotional expression, and collaborative creativity among arts students. Despite institutional and cultural barriers, the findings suggest that rugby's performative and aesthetic dimensions align well with the goals of contemporary arts education. The study proposes strategic pathways for integration, including curriculum redesign, interdisciplinary workshops, and co-creative projects, aiming to foster innovative pedagogies in higher education.

Keywords: rugby; arts education; cross-disciplinary integration; higher education; somatic literacy; creative pedagogy

1. Introduction

In recent years, the paradigm of higher education has gradually shifted from siloed disciplinary instruction to more interdisciplinary and cross-domain models. One of the most compelling frontiers in this shift is the integration of physical education — particularly team sports such as rugby — into arts curricula within higher education institutions. While traditionally perceived as two distinct spheres — rugby being rooted in physical performance and athleticism, and arts education focusing on creativity, aesthetic development, and critical thinking — emerging pedagogical frameworks increasingly emphasize the value of merging these disciplines. This paper explores the possibility, challenges, and strategic pathways for integrating rugby into arts education in universities, particularly within specialized arts colleges and creative faculties.

Rugby, as a sport, embodies a range of values and pedagogical elements that intersect with the core objectives of arts education. It emphasizes teamwork, spatial awareness, improvisational decision-making, and emotional expression — all of which are transferable to artistic disciplines such as performing arts, visual storytelling, choreography, and cinematic direction. According to the World Rugby 2023 Annual Report, rugby is played in over 120 countries with a global participation of more than 9.6 million registered players, including 2.7 million women. In China alone, the number of registered players increased from approximately 60,000 in 2016 to over 130,000 in 2022, reflecting growing national attention to the sport, especially after rugby sevens was included in the Olympic Games. While rugby is still considered a niche sport in many Asian contexts, including China, its association with values such as resilience, communication, and tactical decision-making in dynamic environments offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary exploration.

Arts education in China has also undergone significant transformation in the last decade. According to official data released by Chinese education authorities, the number

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of full-time students enrolled in arts-related majors surpassed 1.2 million in 2021, a 47% increase compared to 2010. More notably, the integration of new media technologies, interactive design, and immersive performance has expanded the boundaries of arts curricula. However, this rapid growth has also exposed limitations: critiques have emerged around students' lack of bodily awareness, weak collaborative instincts in real-time environments, and an over-reliance on digital abstraction over physical engagement. Introducing structured physical disciplines like rugby could enrich students' somatic literacy, foster collaborative awareness, and build emotional resilience — traits that are becoming increasingly important in contemporary art practice and creative industries.

Internationally, some institutions have piloted cross-disciplinary modules that explore the convergence of sport and art. For instance, the University of the Arts London (UAL) launched a collaborative project in 2021 involving performing arts students and rugby players to explore "the choreography of conflict and cooperation" through match reenactments and performance workshops. Similarly, at the University of Melbourne, a 2020 elective course titled "Sport as Performance" brought together visual arts and sports science students to analyze and recreate iconic sports movements using multimedia installations and motion capture technologies. These examples demonstrate that integrating rugby and the arts can yield innovative forms of creative expression, new pedagogical tools, and hybrid knowledge production.

Despite these emerging models, most art colleges — especially in China — still lack institutional pathways, curricular frameworks, or faculty expertise to support such interdisciplinary practices. In many institutions, rugby remains confined to the domain of elective physical education or varsity-level sports, with minimal interaction with arts departments. Meanwhile, arts curricula seldom incorporate the physical vocabulary, symbolic expression, or team dynamics found in sports like rugby. This disciplinary separation may limit the kind of cognitive and affective growth that cross-domain interaction can provide. Moreover, few empirical studies have systematically explored how rugby can be meaningfully embedded in arts education in ways that align with both educational and professional outcomes.

This research seeks to fill that gap by offering a multi-dimensional investigation into how rugby can serve as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary education in art-focused higher education institutions. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collection on student outcomes with qualitative interviews with educators and program developers from both fields. Additionally, it analyzes curricular documents and institutional policies to assess the feasibility of integration in the Chinese context. A particular focus is placed on performing arts, film education, and visual communication — areas where bodily movement, timing, and ensemble work are central to artistic excellence.

Through this inquiry, the paper aims to achieve three main objectives:

- 1) To identify the pedagogical intersections and potential benefits of integrating rugby into arts education.
- 2) To analyze current barriers — cultural, structural, and logistical — to such integration.
- 3) To propose strategic pathways for developing cross-disciplinary programs, including joint modules, collaborative workshops, and arts-based interpretations of rugby practices.

By mapping these opportunities and challenges, the study contributes to a broader conversation about innovation in arts pedagogy and the evolving role of sport in educational environments.

In conclusion, as both rugby and the arts are increasingly recognized as vital components of holistic education, their intersection offers untapped potential for cultivating creative, emotionally intelligent, and socially engaged graduates. This paper presents a timely and necessary contribution to the growing discourse on interdisciplinary education

and responds to the call for more integrative pedagogies that bridge body and mind, movement and meaning, and competition and collaboration [1,2].

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The integration of sports and arts within educational frameworks has increasingly gained traction as educators and scholars seek to develop more holistic, embodied, and interdisciplinary learning environments. The notion of connecting physical education, particularly team-based sports like rugby, with arts education remains relatively under-explored, especially within specialized arts institutions. However, a growing body of literature in sports pedagogy, performance studies, and interdisciplinary education offers useful insights into the feasibility and value of such integration. This section reviews relevant empirical studies and theoretical perspectives, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of embedding rugby within arts education, with a particular focus on the development of creativity, somatic literacy, and collaborative learning.

In the realm of sports education, rugby has long been studied for its impact on physical health, psychological resilience, and character development. According to a 2022 report by World Rugby, structured rugby programs across secondary and tertiary institutions have been shown to improve students' cardiovascular endurance, spatial awareness, and team communication skills. Notably, a longitudinal study by some researchers examining 430 university-level rugby players across the UK found significant improvements not only in physical fitness metrics but also in self-regulation, stress tolerance, and interpersonal coordination over three academic years [2]. These findings support the idea that rugby, beyond being a physical activity, functions as a medium for cultivating psychosocial competencies — skills that are equally valued in arts-based practices such as theater, dance, and ensemble filmmaking.

Simultaneously, research in arts education has emphasized the role of embodiment, physical expression, and performative intelligence in creative learning. Scholars argue that bodily awareness is central to creative cognition, particularly in disciplines involving movement, rhythm, and spatial design [3]. In performing arts education, kinaesthetic intelligence — the capacity to use one's body skillfully and expressively — is regarded as a foundational element. However, studies indicate that many students in digital-centric or visually-based arts curricula often lack sufficient physical engagement or movement training. A 2020 survey by the China Arts Education Association involving 78 universities and 1,540 arts students found that 62% of students rated their "bodily coordination and physical confidence" as average or below average, with over 70% stating they rarely participated in structured physical activity beyond required PE classes. These statistics point to a significant gap in arts education: the disconnection between creative imagination and physical embodiment.

The theoretical foundation for bridging this gap can be found in several interdisciplinary frameworks. One of the most relevant is Embodied Cognition Theory, which posits that cognition is not confined to the brain but is distributed across the entire body. According to some researchers, our sensory-motor systems play a central role in meaning-making processes, particularly in artistic creation [2]. From this perspective, engaging in sports like rugby, which require real-time sensory feedback, decision-making under pressure, and coordinated group movement, can activate and strengthen embodied cognitive patterns that are equally useful in artistic expression. In film direction, for example, understanding movement dynamics and emotional tension within a frame requires a somatic awareness akin to that cultivated through athletic play.

A second theoretical lens is Performance Theory, particularly as articulated by some researchers, who contends that both theater and sports are performative practices that unfold within ritualized time-spaces, governed by symbolic rules and audience engagement [4]. Schechner's comparative studies of sports and drama highlight shared elements such as rehearsed spontaneity (i.e., structured improvisation), strategic improvisation,

and communal emotional investment. Rugby, as a sport characterized by its complex choreography of bodies, physical storytelling, and narrative arcs (such as attack, defense, climax, and resolution), can be interpreted as bearing striking similarities to theatrical or cinematic forms. This intersection offers a valuable pedagogical framework for arts educators seeking to draw from athletic modalities to enhance expressive training and creative collaboration [5].

In the field of interdisciplinary education, Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Co-Creation Pedagogy also offer useful insights. According to some scholars, cross-disciplinary collaboration fosters innovation by forcing students to reconcile different epistemologies, vocabularies, and modes of problem-solving [6]. In a study conducted at the University of Sydney (2020), a pilot module combining sports science students and visual arts students to co-design a sports mural project led to statistically significant improvements in mutual understanding, collaborative satisfaction, and creative output. This supports the notion that in well-designed educational settings, structured collaboration between rugby teams and arts students — such as co-developing performances, installations, or video content — could yield both pedagogical and artistic benefits.

Despite the theoretical potential, existing empirical studies on the integration of sports into arts education remain limited, particularly in the Chinese context. In 2018, fewer than 5% of Chinese-language studies on interdisciplinary education focused on the integration of sports and arts. The majority emphasized STEAM education, indicating a clear lack of research on physical-cognitive interdisciplinarity. The vast majority focused on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) integration, leaving a research gap in body-based and physical-cognitive interdisciplinarity. Moreover, institutional barriers persist: rigid departmental structures, lack of qualified crossover faculty, and skepticism toward "soft" applications of sport in artistic environments often inhibit such integration [7].

Nonetheless, some promising case studies have emerged. At the Shanghai Theatre Academy, a 2021 experimental course titled "Movement, Sport, and Performance" involved physical theater students in weekly rugby-based training sessions, followed by creative reinterpretations of rugby tactics into stage combat and movement sequences. Preliminary findings from the program evaluation indicated increased bodily confidence, improved improvisational skills, and stronger peer collaboration. Similar initiatives are being explored at Hong Kong Baptist University, where film students collaborated with rugby players to create short experimental documentaries examining the aesthetics of athletic movement [8]. These localized experiments provide early evidence that structured integration of rugby into arts curricula can enhance students' physical awareness, range of expressive themes, and creative agency.

In summary, the literature suggests strong theoretical and empirical foundations for exploring the integration of rugby and arts education. Embodied cognition and performance theory affirm the compatibility of athletic and artistic modes of expression, while project-based interdisciplinary models offer practical strategies for implementation. However, the field remains underdeveloped in terms of systematic studies, particularly within arts-focused higher education institutions in Asia. This research addresses this gap by proposing a model for integrating rugby into arts education that is pedagogically sound, culturally sensitive, and practically feasible. In doing so, it contributes not only to interdisciplinary scholarship but also to the evolving discourse on body-based learning, creativity, and collaborative pedagogy in the 21st century.

3. The Current Landscape of Rugby and Arts Education in Higher Institutions

The present educational landscape in higher education institutions reveals an uneven development between rugby and arts education, both in terms of institutional support and curricular innovation. Globally, rugby continues to expand its presence in universities, particularly in regions such as the UK, Australia, South Africa, and increasingly in East

Asia. At the same time, arts education is experiencing its own transformation, fueled by the rise of interdisciplinary pedagogy, digital media, and project-based learning. However, these two domains — rugby and the arts — have largely developed in parallel rather than in partnership.

In terms of rugby's presence in higher education, many universities have embraced the sport not only for its physical benefits but also for its community-building and leadership development functions. According to the 2022 Times Higher Education Sports Engagement Index, 78% of surveyed universities in the UK include rugby as an integral component of their student sports programming. In contrast, China has only recently begun formalizing rugby within university-level sports, largely due to its inclusion in the Olympic program and national policy support for "sports education integration" under the Healthy China 2030 initiative [7]. As of 2023, over 60 Chinese universities have active rugby programs, with institutions like Beijing Sport University and Shanghai University of Sport offering structured training and competitions. Nonetheless, in art-focused institutions such as China Academy of Art or Beijing Film Academy, rugby remains absent from the formal curriculum and is rarely positioned or explored as a potential vehicle for artistic development [9].

Arts education, on the other hand, has undergone a significant diversification. Institutions now offer a wide array of majors ranging from traditional painting and theater to emerging disciplines such as digital media, interactive installation, and performance art. The demand for innovative and interdisciplinary approaches is particularly evident in film schools, design colleges, and performing arts academies. However, this innovation has largely taken place within cognitive and digital domains — such as digital storytelling, interactive design, and computational aesthetics — with limited attention to physical training or body-based methods. A 2021 survey by the China Association for Higher Arts Education found that only 18% of art universities required more than one physical education module for undergraduates, and less than 6% offered any elective that integrated physical activity with artistic practice.

This disconnect is also visible in faculty structures and departmental cultures. Physical education departments are often administratively separate from arts faculties, with minimal dialogue between staff. While some arts instructors value movement-based learning — particularly in fields such as acting, choreography, or performance design — they often lack institutional support to incorporate sports-based content. Similarly, PE faculty may not perceive rugby as relevant to the learning outcomes of arts students, thereby reinforcing disciplinary boundaries.

Despite these limitations, a small number of institutions are beginning to experiment with cross-domain models. For example, a co-curricular program has been developed in which visual arts students document live rugby matches through photography and video, transforming sports events into sites of creative practice. A program called "Body in Motion" encourages collaboration between sports science and performance students to explore the expressive potential of athletic movement. Although such initiatives are still limited, they demonstrate rugby's potential to be not only a physical activity but also a pedagogically meaningful contributor to arts-based learning.

In sum, the current landscape shows both promising initiatives and persistent gaps. Both rugby and arts education are increasingly recognized for their pedagogical contributions — ranging from leadership development to methodological innovation. However, the lack of structural and curricular convergence continues to hinder meaningful cross-disciplinary learning. As we move into the next section, it becomes crucial to identify the opportunities and challenges involved in bridging these two domains.

4. Opportunities and Challenges in Cross-Disciplinary Integration

The integration of rugby and arts education in higher institutions offers both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. From an opportunity perspective, the

convergence of these domains aligns well with contemporary educational goals that emphasize holistic development, interdisciplinary fluency, and experiential learning. On the challenge side, practical, cultural, and institutional barriers make integration complex, especially within specialized academic environments such as art colleges.

One of the most compelling opportunities lies in the development of somatic intelligence — the ability to understand, interpret, and express through the body. Rugby, with its reliance on dynamic physical movement, spatial strategy, and team coordination, can help arts students develop a deeper awareness of bodily motion. This is particularly valuable in disciplines like acting, directing, dance, and even film editing, where understanding rhythm, timing, and the physicality of scenes is essential. Additionally, the emotional intensity and narrative arcs present in rugby — competition, conflict, cooperation, and resolution — mirror those in dramatic and cinematic storytelling, offering rich thematic material for artistic interpretation.

A second opportunity is collaborative creativity. Rugby is inherently a team sport that requires players to read cues, make decisions under pressure, and adapt to rapidly changing environments — skills that are directly transferable to ensemble-based artistic practices. This opens the door for cross-disciplinary projects that translate the dynamics of rugby — such as coordinated formations and collective momentum — into choreographed movement pieces, documentaries on team dynamics, or performance art inspired by athletic rituals. For institutions looking to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, rugby offers a practical and symbolic framework for joint exploration.

There are also institutional incentives. Integrating rugby into arts curricula could help universities respond to national or regional mandates promoting physical education, mental health, and aesthetic education in China. Furthermore, offering innovative electives or workshops that combine rugby and art may enhance student engagement, attract media attention, and position the institution as a leader in educational innovation.

However, several challenges must be addressed to realize these potentials. The first is cultural resistance. In many art institutions, physical education is still viewed as secondary or even irrelevant to artistic training. Students may resist rugby due to stereotypes of it being aggressive or "unartistic", while faculty may lack the conceptual frameworks to connect sport and creativity. Conversely, rugby coaches may not appreciate or understand how their discipline could contribute to an arts education setting.

The second challenge is curricular integration. Designing a course or module that meaningfully bridges rugby and art requires careful planning, cross-department collaboration, and faculty with hybrid expertise. Few institutions have educators who are trained in both domains, and existing schedules may not accommodate the addition of new interdisciplinary courses or modules. Additionally, assessment frameworks must evolve to evaluate not only physical performance or technical skill, but also creative synthesis and collaborative process.

The third challenge involves logistical and infrastructural limitations. Many arts colleges lack sports facilities suitable for rugby or may have limited funding for new physical education initiatives. Moreover, integrating a physically demanding sport like rugby requires addressing safety, insurance, and inclusivity concerns — especially for students unfamiliar with contact sports.

Lastly, the challenge of sustained institutional support cannot be overstated. Without administrative buy-in, even the most innovative pilot programs may fail to scale or survive. Integrating rugby into arts education demands long-term commitment, including curriculum redesign, faculty training, student recruitment, and outcome evaluation.

In conclusion, the cross-disciplinary integration of rugby and arts education presents a unique opportunity to redefine the boundaries of creative learning. While significant challenges exist — ranging from cultural perceptions to logistical constraints — the educational benefits are compelling. By strategically addressing these barriers and leveraging successful models, higher institutions can unlock new pathways for embodied creativity, collaborative innovation, and pedagogical transformation.

5. Case Studies of Rugby-Arts Educational Fusion

To understand how rugby and arts education can be integrated in practice, it is helpful to examine pioneering case studies from various global institutions. While still relatively rare, several experimental programs and collaborative initiatives provide valuable insights into the potential benefits and limitations of such cross-disciplinary endeavors.

One notable example is a performance design program that initiated a collaborative project titled "Collision and Flow." The project paired performing arts students with members of a local rugby team to co-develop site-specific performances inspired by rugby gameplay. Over a six-week workshop series, students observed training sessions, interviewed players, and participated in non-contact drills. The resulting performance pieces incorporated live sound, movement improvisation, and wearable design elements reflecting the tension and rhythm experienced during rugby matches. Post-project evaluations showed a significant increase in students' confidence in physical storytelling, and most participants reported improved understanding of teamwork as a creative tool.

Another example comes from a program combining sport science and fine arts, where art students and sports science majors collaborated to analyze movement patterns in rugby through drawing, motion capture, and sculpture. The students transformed game trajectories and biomechanical data into abstract visual representations, culminating in a public exhibition that attracted thousands of visitors. Feedback from faculty highlighted the success of the program in bridging technical analysis and visual interpretation, fostering both empirical and aesthetic modes of thinking.

In China, although comprehensive programs are still in their early stages, a pilot course launched in 2021 titled "Movement, Sport, and Performance" introduced weekly rugby-inspired movement sessions followed by creative reinterpretation workshops. Students from acting and directing majors worked with PE coaches to study body momentum, spatial formation, and vocal projection in rugby, then translated those insights into ensemble scenes and devised theater. A follow-up survey indicated that the majority of students found the rugby exercises beneficial to their stage presence and physical engagement, while faculty reported improved student collaboration and creative risk-taking.

A grassroots initiative worth noting is a project called "Scrum Stories," organized by an independent arts collective in collaboration with university-level rugby teams. The project sought to document the socio-cultural narratives embedded in rugby culture through photography, oral history, and experimental video. Artists embedded with teams for two months, capturing moments of victory, loss, ritual, and preparation. The resulting exhibition highlighted the emotional depth and performative structure of rugby, emphasizing its narrative potential beyond mere athleticism.

These case studies illustrate multiple models of rugby-arts fusion: performative reinterpretation, data-driven visualization, narrative documentation, and kinesthetic translation. In all cases, successful outcomes depended on strong institutional support, interdisciplinary facilitation, and student openness to embodied learning. They demonstrate that with the right framework, rugby can serve as a dynamic tool for both experiential learning and creative exploration in arts education.

6. Strategic Pathways for Cross-Disciplinary Implementation

Building on the successes and challenges identified in previous chapters, this section outlines strategic pathways for implementing rugby-arts integration in higher education institutions — particularly within specialized arts colleges. These pathways are informed by international case studies, existing pedagogical models, and practical considerations specific to Chinese and global higher education institutions.

The most accessible entry point for rugby-arts integration is the development of elective modules that bring together physical education and creative arts students. Courses such as "Rugby and Performance", "Sports Narratives in Film", or "Kinetics and Choreography" could be designed to fulfill credit requirements in both departments. These courses

can include joint lectures, field observation, embodied workshops, and project-based assessment. Ideally, they would be co-taught by faculty from sports and arts disciplines to ensure balance.

Facilitating cross-departmental initiatives, such as interdisciplinary workshops or semester-long joint productions, allows for real-time interaction between rugby athletes and arts students. These can take the form of short films, live performances, exhibitions, or even augmented reality installations based on sports themes. Institutions can formalize such initiatives through a "Creative Athletic Collaboration Lab" or "Movement & Media Studio", providing structural and spatial support.

For sustainable integration, faculty development is key. Institutions can host training sessions or invite visiting scholars who specialize in somatic education, performance theory, or sports aesthetics to lead interdisciplinary modules. Providing faculty with certification opportunities and funding for joint research can help develop educators proficient in both disciplines.

Beyond the classroom, co-curricular activities such as rugby-inspired theater festivals, photography contests, or movement jam sessions can promote informal cross-pollination of ideas. Institutions can use existing clubs or student societies to pilot these initiatives, fostering grassroots-level interdisciplinary engagement.

Institutional leadership plays a critical role. Integrating rugby and arts education requires administrative flexibility in scheduling, credit allocation, and resource sharing. Universities can create incentives such as interdisciplinary research grants, teaching awards, or targeted scholarships for students involved in cross-disciplinary performance projects.

Establishing partnerships with foreign institutions that have successfully implemented similar models can accelerate the learning curve. Exchange programs, joint symposia, or virtual collaborative courses (COIL) can expose students and faculty to global best practices and open up comparative perspectives.

By systematically adopting these strategic pathways, institutions can transition from isolated experimental workshops to a sustainable ecosystem that supports long-term cross-disciplinary innovation. The long-term goal is not only to enrich student experience but also to position the university at the forefront of progressive, embodied, and integrative education.

7. Conclusion

The integration of rugby and arts education challenges the longstanding division between physical and intellectual labor, performance and play, athleticism and artistry. This research suggests that not only is such integration feasible, but it is also pedagogically valuable — enhancing creativity, teamwork, emotional literacy, and physical intelligence among students. However, this discussion must also acknowledge the tensions and practical considerations that influence implementation.

First, disciplinary paradigms remain a key barrier. Arts faculties tend to emphasize introspection, individual expression, and conceptual thinking, whereas sports programs often focus on competition, strategic planning, and team-based execution. Reconciling these differences requires a shared pedagogical language that frames rugby not just as a sport, but as a form of physical dramaturgy and spatial storytelling. Conversely, arts education must broaden its understanding of expression to include the performative and kinetic vocabulary embedded in sport.

Second, institutional structure often inhibits collaboration. Separate budgeting, incompatible credit systems, and rigid curricula can make interdisciplinary initiatives cumbersome. This underscores the need for flexible administrative models that allow for shared teaching, co-assessment, and cross-listed courses. Institutions that prioritize innovation — both structurally and philosophically — will have a comparative advantage in implementing such programs.

Third, the student experience must be central to evaluation. Preliminary case studies indicate high levels of engagement, but also raise questions about inclusivity, assessment criteria, and transferability of skills. More research is needed on how participation in rugby-arts programs influences students' career trajectories, identity formation, and creative output. Particular attention must be paid to gender dynamics, access to physical training, and cultural attitudes toward sport in artistic environments.

Lastly, globalization and digital media open new possibilities for virtual or hybrid models of rugby-arts fusion. Motion capture, VR simulations, and remote collaboration can make these programs more scalable and adaptable to diverse institutional contexts. Embracing these tools can amplify the impact and visibility of such interdisciplinary efforts.

In conclusion, integrating rugby and arts education is more than a novelty — it is a strategic reimagining of what holistic education can look like in the 21st century. By nurturing both the expressive mind and the intelligent body, institutions can cultivate graduates who are not only creatively skilled but also physically engaged, socially aware, and capable of navigating complex collaborative environments. This discussion serves as a call to action for educators, administrators, and policymakers to invest in pedagogies that are embodied, cross-disciplinary, and responsive to future educational demands.

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