Blending Media Arts with Mathematics: Insights and Innovations in STEAM Education

Sahar Aghasafari
e-mail: s.aghasafari@sc.edu
University of South Carolina Lancaster, SC, US

Mark Malloy
e-mail: mm232@email.sc.edu
University of South Carolina Lancaster, SC, US

Abstract

This study explores the integration of media arts with mathematics education through a focused investigation of the Pythagorean theorem, aiming to elucidate how this interdisciplinary approach can enhance student engagement and conceptual understanding. Recognizing the transformative potential of technology in education, we specifically examine the use of digital media arts tools to teach this foundational mathematical concept. Our research is motivated by the goal of leveraging technology to create more engaging and effective learning experiences in mathematics, thereby addressing challenges in teaching abstract concepts. We investigate the pedagogical benefits of integrating media arts into mathematics education through a qualitative case study involving undergraduate research assistants. The selection of the Pythagorean theorem as our focal point is justified by its critical importance in geometry and its wide applicability across STEM fields. Our findings reveal that media arts foster deeper engagement and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of mathematical principles among students. This paper contributes to the field by providing evidence-based insights into the synergistic potential of combining media arts with mathematics education, underscoring the value of innovative approaches in enhancing the learning and teaching of mathematics.

1. Introduction

Integrating science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) into educational curricula is not merely a trend but a vital evolution in teaching and learning methodologies. The inclusion of media arts within mathematics education emerges as a transformative method poised to redefine student engagement and learning outcomes. Media arts, encompassing digital arts, animation, game design, and more, offer unique avenues for creativity, expression, and exploration. Their application in mathematics education can significantly elevate student engagement, comprehension, retention, and practical application of complex mathematical concepts [1,2,3,4, 5].

The Pythagorean theorem, a fundamental principle in geometry, serves as an ideal case study for this integration. Despite its critical importance in numerous STEM fields, its abstract nature often challenges learners. Applying digital media arts as a pedagogical tool promises a more accessible, engaging, and comprehensive approach to this and similar mathematical concepts. Recent studies indicate that students exposed to STEAM approaches, particularly those incorporating media arts, show improved engagement and a deeper understanding of mathematical principles [5,6]. These findings highlight the potential of media arts to make abstract mathematical concepts more tangible and relatable, thereby fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment.

Our investigation is further motivated by the evolving role of technology in education and the imperative to leverage such advancements to enhance traditional teaching methodologies. This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting innovative STEAM education strategies by integrating media arts with the Pythagorean theorem study. Through a qualitative analysis of educational interventions that blend media arts with mathematics, we offer insights into

how such integrative approaches can enrich student engagement and facilitate a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of mathematical concepts. This forward-looking approach to STEAM education addresses the urgent need for engaging and effective educational strategies. By incorporating media arts into mathematics education, we leverage diverse creative expression and exploration avenues, enhancing student engagement and facilitating a deeper connection to mathematical concepts. This paper examines the integration process and outcomes, focusing on the Pythagorean theorem to highlight the abstract challenges often presented to students and proposing a multifaceted approach to overcome these barriers, thereby contributing valuable insights into the enrichment of STEAM education and underscoring the importance of interdisciplinary methods in fostering a comprehensive understanding of mathematics for the 21st century.

2. Theoretical Background

The integration of media arts into mathematics education is an evolving area of pedagogical research, increasingly recognized for its potential to enrich student engagement, enhance conceptual understanding, and bolster knowledge retention. This theoretical foundation underpins our study, drawing upon various sources that illustrate this interdisciplinary approach's multifaceted benefits.

2.1 Student Engagement

Numerous studies have demonstrated increased student engagement and motivation to learn mathematical concepts by incorporating creative and body-based learning activities. Jeff et al. [7] found that engaging students in creative body-based learning activities significantly improved their attitudes toward mathematics. The authors noted that "students who previously showed little interest in mathematics became intensely engaged" [7, p. 70]. This indicates that leveraging students' physical and creative expressions can make studying abstract mathematical ideas more appealing and approachable.

Similarly, Tracy et al. [8] revealed enhanced participation and focus when students were involved in activities that integrated movement and creativity into mathematics lessons. They found that such approaches engaged students and supported long-term retention of mathematical concepts. Tracy et al. [8] emphasized that "the hands-on process of creative activities was highly engaging and helped solidify students' understanding of geometric concepts" [p. 170]. Robyne and MacGill [9] explored the role of creative and body-based learning in fostering inclusion and found that these methodologies significantly increased motivation and comprehension among diverse student groups. They highlighted that "artistic aspects activate emotions and an aesthetic sense of mathematical beauty," thereby enhancing student engagement and interest in mathematics [9, p. 1230].

Furthermore, An et al. [10] examined the impact of integrating music into mathematics lessons and found that this interdisciplinary approach improved elementary students' disposition towards mathematics. The study showed that "students' attitudes towards mathematics became more positive when music was used as a medium for teaching mathematical concepts" [10, p. 15]. This body of research collectively underscores the critical role of student engagement in effective math education and points to the potential of creative and body-based learning integration to provide engaging, creative gateways for students to interact with and find meaning in mathematical ideas and processes.

2.2 Conceptual Understanding Enhanced Through Media Arts

The integration of media arts into mathematics education transcends mere student engagement, creating a powerful bridge between conceptual understanding and mastery of mathematical concepts. An enlightening 18-month ethnographic study by Peppler [2] illuminates this transformative potential, showcasing urban youth engaging with mathematics through media arts projects, from quilting to music production and breakdancing. This approach not only made

mathematics more accessible and meaningful but also demonstrated significant improvements in students' spatial reasoning, proportional logic skills, and pattern recognition—core competencies in mathematical thinking.

Echoing Peppler's findings, Bequette and Bequette [1] emphasize the critical role of integrating arts into STEM education. They argue that art and design provide unique contexts that stimulate an innovative and inquiry-based approach to learning, which is essential for the holistic understanding of STEM subjects, including mathematics. This foundational perspective suggests that the arts are not peripheral but integral to fostering a deep, conceptual grasp of mathematical principles through creativity and design thinking.

Further supporting this notion, Laura and Kesteren [3] highlight the effectiveness of STEAM approaches in bridging the gap between the arts and STEM. They point out that STEAM education, which combines the analytical strengths of STEM disciplines with the creative and critical thinking fostered by the arts, leads to a more engaged learning experience. This engagement is pivotal for developing a nuanced understanding of mathematics, as it encourages students to apply mathematical concepts in diverse and creative ways, thereby deepening their understanding and mastery of the subject.

Moreover, Aibhín and Tangney's [5] work on digital art integration reinforces the idea that media art projects enhance mathematical understanding. Their research reveals that digital art projects engage students and challenge them to apply mathematical concepts in innovative contexts, leading to a more profound comprehension of the material. This approach aligns with the broader objectives of STEAM education by marrying mathematics's abstract and logical aspects with the expressive and imaginative facets of the arts.

In essence, the fusion of media arts with mathematics education represents a paradigm shift in how we conceive of teaching and learning mathematics. It underscores the power of contextual, applied learning in deepening conceptual understanding and showcases the remarkable potential of media arts as a conduit for transformative educational experiences. By integrating media arts into the mathematics curriculum, educators can unlock new dimensions of understanding and appreciation for mathematics among students, fostering a generation of learners equipped with both the creative and analytical skills necessary for the challenges of the 21st century.

2.3 Knowledge Retention

The multimodal nature of media art production also seems to have benefits for encoding math concepts into memory. Studies by An et al. [10] found that having students physically manipulate materials to construct fractal geometry models out of paper or 3D print mathematical shapes improved knowledge retention over time. They posit that tapping into diverse sensory experiences beyond purely visual processing activates more brain areas when learning new mathematical information. Other research has also shown positive links between embodied cognition theory and STEAM education practices [11].

As this review outlines, integrating media arts activities into the math curriculum is strongly grounded in the latest educational research. Outcomes include heightened student engagement, improved conceptual mastery, and increased retention of mathematical knowledge over time. As Bequette and Bequette [1] advocate, “Artistic pursuits provide an excellent venue for reinforcing mathematical concepts and opening conversations that unravel the mystery of mathematics” [1, p. 40]. Further research is still needed to develop specific best practices for STEAM integration models. However, the evidence thus far points to substantial benefits from blending creative arts, such as media production, with teaching mathematical topics and problem-solving.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Objective and Rationale

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how integrating media arts into mathematics education, specifically focusing on the Pythagorean theorem, can enhance student engagement, comprehension, and retention of mathematical concepts. The rationale behind this research is grounded in the potential of digital media arts to transform traditional mathematics teaching methods, making abstract concepts more accessible and engaging through creative and interactive digital tools. The Pythagorean theorem was chosen as the focal point of this study due to its fundamental role in mathematics and potential for creative exploration. Its selection was driven by the desire to explore a universally recognized and applicable concept across various fields, providing a robust foundation for integrating media arts. This decision also stems from preliminary discussions with participants, who identified the theorem as a mathematical concept that often presents challenges in understanding, thereby offering a valuable opportunity for innovation in teaching methods.

3.2 Participants

Our study engaged five undergraduate research assistants from the University of Southeastern US, each selected for their unique blend of expertise and interest in mathematics, arts, and technology. These individuals were involved in a specialized project to develop and pilot mathematics learning modules that intricately weave media arts into the curriculum centered around the Pythagorean theorem. Their participation in this project was entirely voluntary, driven by a shared interest in exploring the intersection of digital media arts and mathematics education. This engagement offered them a unique opportunity to contribute to innovative educational strategies outside the traditional classroom setting. Their tasks within the project spanned from the conceptual design of learning modules to the hands-on implementation of these educational tools, providing them with a comprehensive experience in the practical application of integrating media arts into mathematics education.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The data collection process was meticulously designed to capture the essence of media arts integration into mathematics education. A collection of students' works—including digital graphics, animations, and multimedia presentations—served as artifacts, evidencing the interplay between media arts and mathematics. Field notes taken during the project's development phases detailed the decision-making process, including platform selection and instructional design. These notes were complemented by team meeting recordings and brainstorming sessions, providing insight into the collaborative and innovative environment fostered among the participants. Focus group interviews were structured around specific questions aimed at understanding participants' experiences, such as:

- How did the integration of media arts influence your understanding of the Pythagorean theorem?
- What challenges and opportunities did you encounter while using digital platforms for mathematical exploration?

3.4 Platform Selection Criteria

In our study, we meticulously selected eight digital platforms from an initial review of more than twenty based on carefully defined criteria aligned with our pedagogical objectives. The platforms were evaluated using a comparison matrix in Table 1 to ensure they met the following criteria:

- User-Friendliness: Ensuring the platforms were intuitive and simple for students to navigate.
- Accessibility: Guaranteeing that students at different levels of technological proficiency could easily access and use the tools.
- Creative Potential: Favoring platforms offering extensive creative expression features specifically tailored to mathematical concepts.

- Relevance: Prioritizing platforms capable of facilitating a meaningful exploration of the Pythagorean theorem in innovative and pedagogically sound ways.

Platform	User-Friendliness	Accessibility	Creative Potential	Relevance to Pythagorean Theorem
Adobe Creative Cloud Express	High	High	High	High
Video Poem	Medium	Medium	High	High
The Wick Editor	High	High	High	High
Code Scratch	High	High	High	High
Piskel App	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
AutoDraw	High	High	Medium	Medium
Adobe Voice Animator	High	High	Medium	Medium
Digital Krita	Medium	Medium	High	Medium

Table 1*: Comparison Matrix of Selected Digital Platforms*

3.5 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis [14] of data from field notes, student artifacts, and interview transcripts followed a structured approach to identify patterns and themes related to integrating media arts and mathematics education. This method was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in exploring complex qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and the educational impact of the project.

4. Implementation

In our innovative quest to integrate media arts with mathematics education, we focused specifically on the Pythagorean theorem. This endeavor led us beyond traditional teaching methodologies, aiming to highlight computational aspects of the theorem's foundational proofs, enriching students' conceptual understanding. Our comprehensive review of over twenty online media art platforms resulted in selecting eight distinguished for their pedagogical value, accessibility, creative potential, and user-friendliness: Adobe Creative Cloud Express, Video Poem, The Wick Editor, Code Scratch, Piskel App, AutoDraw, Adobe Voice Animator, and Digital Krita. These platforms were chosen for their exceptional potential to render abstract mathematical concepts into tangible and creative expressions, thereby elucidating the conceptual underpinnings of the Pythagorean theorem.

The selected digital tools were meticulously aligned with our learning objectives, aimed at fostering an interactive and immersive exploration of the Pythagorean theorem. Adobe Creative Cloud Express in Figure 1, for instance, was utilized to craft visually engaging infographics elucidating the theorem’s principles, whereas Video Poem in Figure 2 facilitated students in articulating the theorem’s real-world applications through narrative storytelling. Similarly, The Wick Editor in Figure 3 and the Piskel App in Figure 4 enabled the creation of animations that contextualize the theorem in real-life scenarios, enhancing the accessibility and relatability of these abstract mathematical concepts.

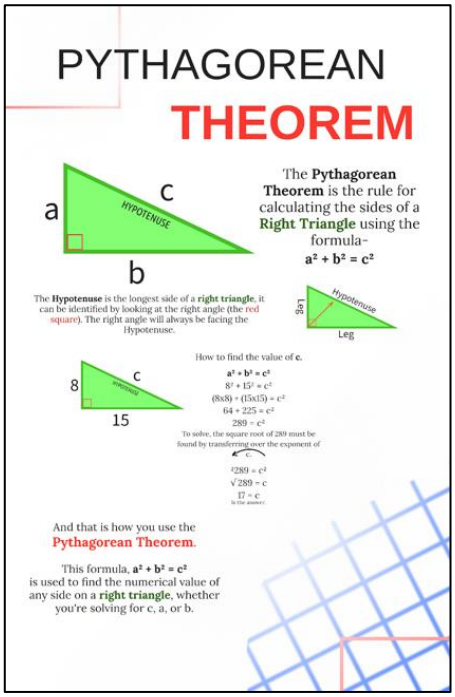

Figure 1: *Adobe Creative Cloud Express*

Figure 2: *Video Poem, visit* *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hvxhT24xTUTEyBuKFr2PzPb6iqmQZ7tb/view?usp=share_link*

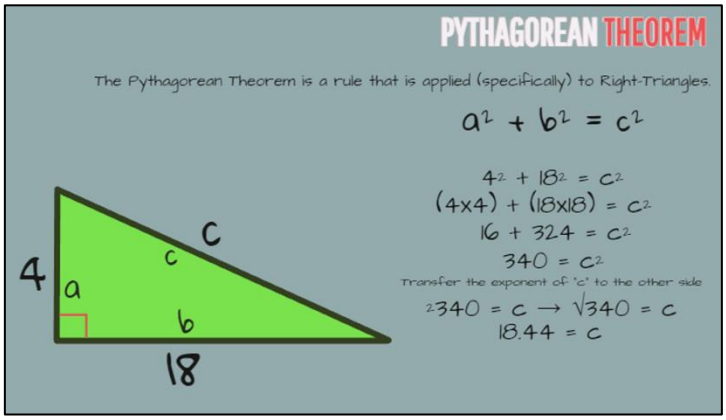

Figure 3: *Wick Editor, visit*

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1l6GxzZBMZjP4gcsRTmr5tckNyWMq1l5j/view?usp=share_link

Figure 4: *Piskel App, visit https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KDANicTYruywiF7VhzMF3YCX_ZMjjJkH/view?usp=share_link*

Further, platforms like Code Scratch in Figure 5 and Adobe Voice Animator in Figure 6 were pivotal in developing interactive simulations and animated stories depicting the Pythagorean theorem in action, promoting a hands-on learning experience. AutoDraw in Figure 7 and Digital Krita in Figure 8 provided unique avenues for students to depict the theorem's geometric principles through digital art, seamlessly merging art and mathematics.

To maximize the efficacy of these tools, scaffolded activities were meticulously designed, guiding students from foundational introductions to more elaborate projects. Adobe Creative Cloud Express was used to create infographics that visually broke down the theorem's components and principles, serving as a foundation for further exploration. In Video Poem, students created narrative storytelling projects that tied the theorem's principles to real-world scenarios, such as navigation and construction, enhancing their understanding through creative expression. The Wick Editor allowed students to create interactive animations, enabling them to manipulate geometric shapes to form right-angled triangles and visually prove the theorem, promoting hands-on exploration. Code Scratch involved students in developing a game that required players to construct proofs of the Pythagorean theorem, encouraging critical thinking about geometric relationships and properties. Piskel App and Adobe Voice Animator were used to create pixel art and animated stories that depicted the theorem's principles in action, enhancing understanding through visual and interactive engagement. AutoDraw helped students sketch and label diagrams of right-angled triangles, experimenting with different configurations to internalize the theorem's logic. Digital Krita facilitated detailed visualizations of the theorem's proof, supporting reflective and exploratory activities.

These activities were instrumental in encouraging students to actively engage with the Pythagorean theorem—creating posters, animations, games, and digital artwork—thus deepening their understanding and practical application of the mathematical concepts. This pedagogical strategy aimed to transform students from passive learners to active creators, employing media arts as a medium to visualize, explore, and internalize mathematical ideas.

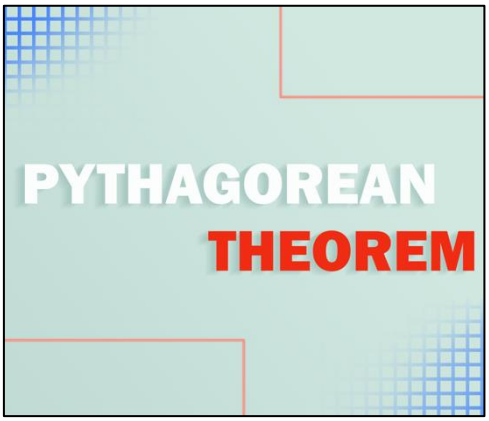

Figure 5: *Code Scratch, visit pythag-theo.netlify.app*

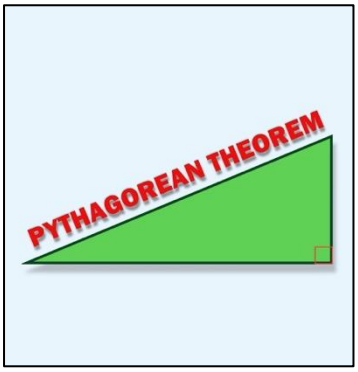

Figure 6: *Adobe Voice Animator, visit https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Kvpw0_q6GlmXLpz8q9qUyvR62oeCg8rL/view?usp=sharing*

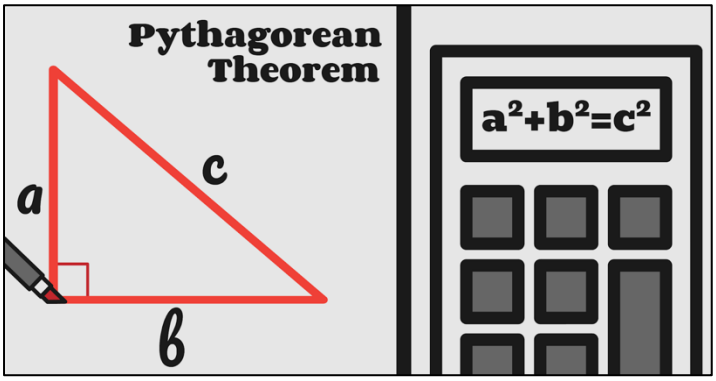

Figure 7: *AutoDraw*

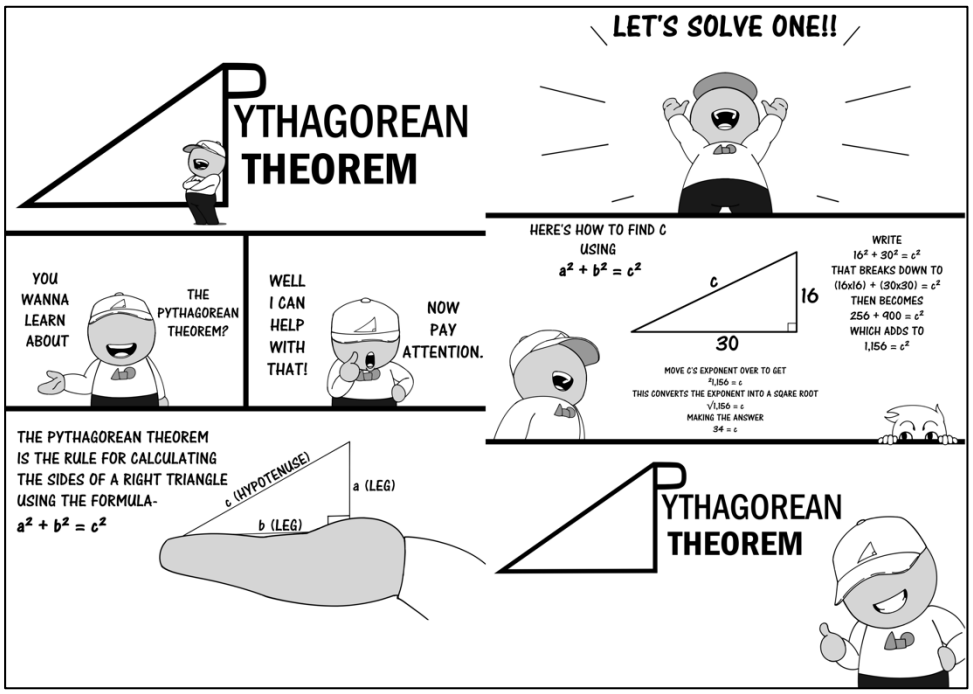

Figure 8: *Digital Krita*

Our approach to integrating media arts into mathematics education aimed to bolster students' comprehension of the Pythagorean theorem, instilling a sense of ownership and enthusiasm for learning. By offering diverse and innovative outlets for expression, we encouraged students to venture beyond traditional mathematical boundaries, fostering a deeper, more personal connection with the subject. This innovative methodology demonstrates that when students are equipped with creative tools to express and manipulate mathematical concepts, their engagement, understanding, and retention of these concepts are significantly enhanced.

Figures 1 through 8 serve as a testament to this approach, showcasing student-created artifacts that perform calculations and explore the theorem's proof, embodying higher-order thinking. These artifacts underscore the viability of media arts integration in mathematics, paving the way for future applications beyond the Pythagorean theorem and contributing to the evolving discourse on STEAM education.

5. Findings

Our exploration into integrating media arts with the Pythagorean theorem uncovered insights that transcend traditional learning outcomes. Through the qualitative analysis of observations, student artifacts, and focus group interviews, we discovered that our approach significantly bolstered engagement, comprehension, and the retention of mathematical concepts.

5.1 Enhanced Visualization and Interactivity

Notably, our investigation revealed that students' engagement with digital platforms did more than bring the theorem's concepts to life; it also facilitated a deeper understanding of its proof. An illustrative student project used The Wick Editor in Figure 9 to depict the theorem in a real-world context and animate the step-by-step logic of the proof itself, offering a tangible insight into its foundational truth.

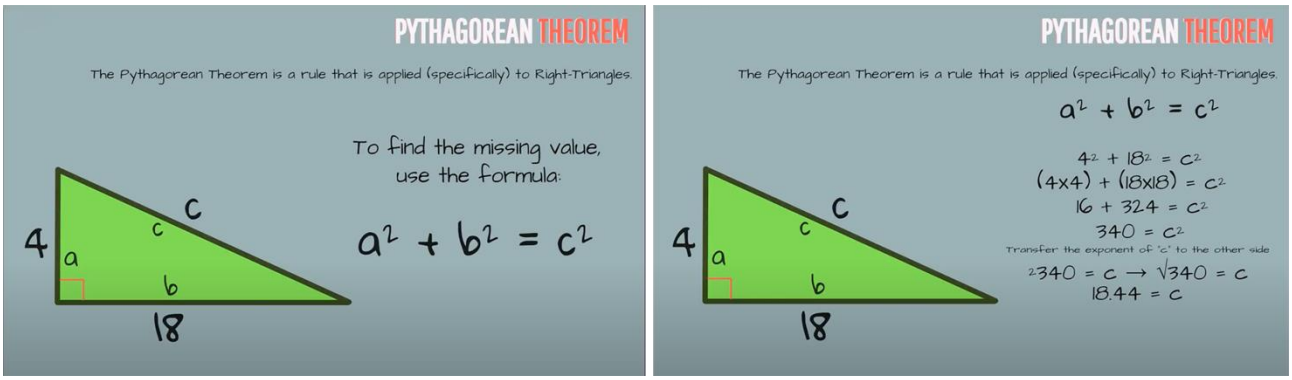

Figure 9: *Wick Editor, Animating the Step-by-Step Proof of the Pythagorean Theorem*

5.2 Creativity and Personalized Learning

The integration of media arts also allowed students to examine the theorem's proofs creatively. A standout video poem in the Figure 10 project tied the theorem's principles to architectural design, encouraging students to think critically about the geometric proof underlying their creative expressions.

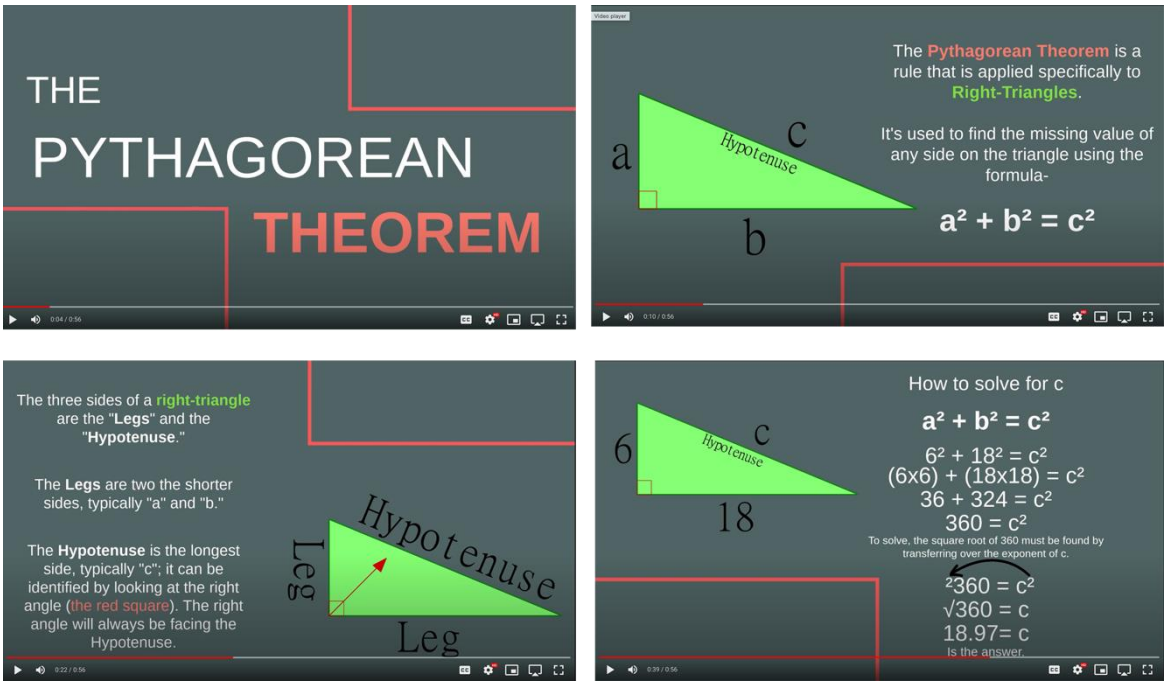

Figure 10: *Video Poems, Narrative Story of the Pythagorean Theorem*

5.3 21st Century Skill Building

The creation of media art projects focusing on the Pythagorean theorem's proof significantly enhanced students' technological literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. A collaborative project in Code Scratch, illustrated in Figure 11, involved students using a structured process to create representations of the Pythagorean theorem and develop practice exercises to answer related questions. The process included configuring a concept through brainstorming and research, sketching and selecting a design, creating and merging required assets, moving these assets to Code Scratch, inputting appropriate commands and codes, and finalizing and rendering the game. The resulting game, which challenged users to construct proofs of the theorem, exemplified

how digital tools could be harnessed to reinforce mathematical reasoning skills. This interactive approach reinforced their understanding of the theorem and enhanced their problem-solving skills, ensuring that students thoroughly understood the content by applying their knowledge in various contexts.

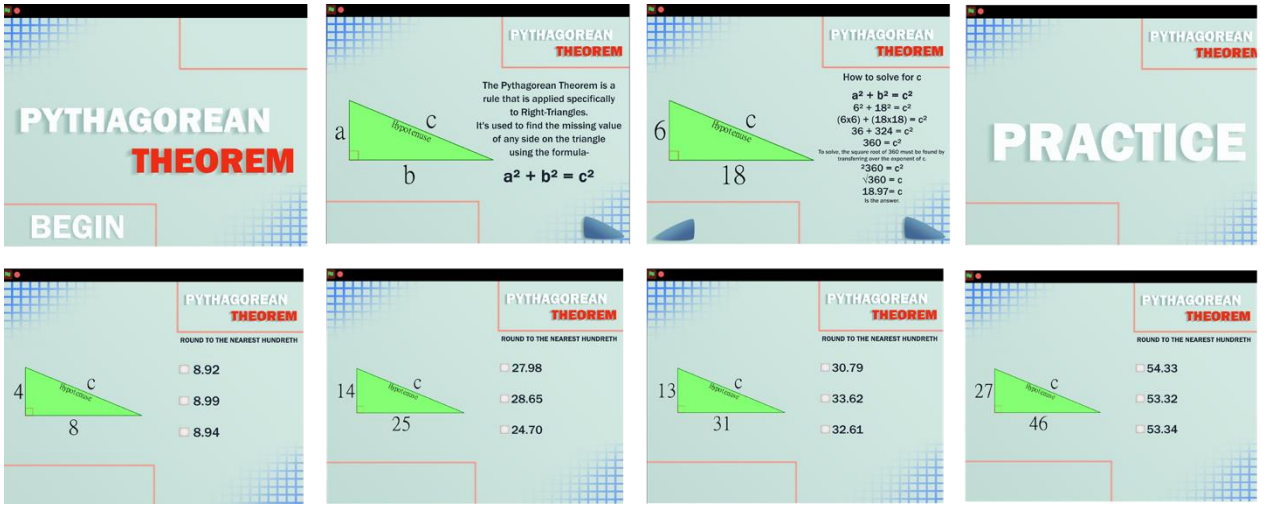

Figure 11: *Code Scratch for Understanding and Applying the Pythagorean Theorem*

5.4 Metacognition and Conceptual Understanding

By creating personalized representations that highlighted the theorem's proof, students underwent a reflective process that deepened their conceptual understanding. A digital art piece using Digital Krita, which visually dissected the proof, exemplified how students could explore and internalize the geometric principles underlying the Pythagorean theorem.

These findings underscore the significant potential of integrating media arts into mathematics education. By providing avenues for students to creatively express and critically engage with mathematical concepts, especially through the exploration of proofs, our study demonstrates the value of innovative and hands-on learning experiences in fostering a deeper understanding of mathematics. This approach not only enhances student engagement and understanding but also cultivates a profound appreciation for the beauty and logic of mathematical proofs, marking a meaningful contribution to the field of STEAM education.

6. Discussion

Our investigation into integrating media arts within the Pythagorean theorem's educational framework marks a significant advancement in the interdisciplinary STEAM dialogue. Through a focused application of digital media arts, this research not only aligns with but also extends the foundational insights provided by Bequette and Bequette [1], Peppler [2], and others [3,4] on the fusion of arts and STEM education. Our study underscores the unique pedagogical value of employing digital media to foster a deeper engagement and understanding of mathematical concepts, notably the Pythagorean theorem.

Echoing the sentiments of Laura and Kesteren [3] and Pavel [4] on the positive impacts of arts integration, our findings reveal that media arts play a crucial role in demystifying complex mathematical ideas. This is further supported by the empirical evidence from Aibhín and Tangney [5] and Teaching Mathematics through Art Using Digital Technologies [6], highlighting digital media's capability to significantly bolster mathematical engagement and comprehension. Our research diverges by providing a granular look at how specific digital tools captivate students and enhance their grasp of mathematical fundamentals through creative exploration.

The diversity in media arts applications in mathematics education, ranging from creative body-based learning [7] to fostering motivation and engagement through qualitative teacher-student interactions [8], illustrates the wide spectrum of creative approaches that can augment learning outcomes. Our study contributes novel insights into this array by showcasing the successful application of creative computing [16] and digital storytelling [15] to illuminate the Pythagorean theorem, reinforcing the utility of such innovative pedagogical strategies. Additionally, integrating creative and body-based learning methods supports diverse learners and fosters inclusion in educational settings [9].

7. Conclusion

By integrating media arts into the teaching of the Pythagorean theorem, our study illuminates a pathway for transforming mathematics education. Our empirical evidence corroborates the existing advocacy for blending arts and technology [1,2,3] and illuminates specific digital media arts tools' roles in deepening mathematical understanding. Our findings extend beyond the realm of the Pythagorean theorem, suggesting a flexible and impactful methodology for incorporating media arts across various mathematical topics.

This adaptability is particularly crucial for meeting the educational demands of the 21st century, where bridging traditional disciplinary divides and leveraging technological advancements becomes essential. Therefore, our investigation contributes to the ongoing evolution of STEAM education and opens new avenues for research. By demonstrating the practical application of media arts to clarify and engage with fundamental mathematical concepts, we underline the effectiveness of creative pedagogical strategies in enhancing educational experiences and outcomes.

Inspired by the groundwork laid in this study, future research promises to further broaden the scope of STEAM education. By exploring the integration of media arts in other mathematical areas, we can continue to innovate and enrich teaching and learning practices, equipping students with the critical, creative, and technological skills necessary for their future success.

Our study enriches the STEAM education discourse by offering detailed insights into the application of media arts within mathematics education. It aligns with the burgeoning body of literature advocating for the arts and technology merger and charts new territories for how this integration can be specifically tailored to enhance mathematics teaching and learning.

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