

## **Experiential Learning through the Arts**

Gina Alicea

This lecture introduces the theory and practice of art education at the Lab Schools of the University of Chicago. The main tenets of Dewey's educational philosophy that have been implemented at the Lab Schools are discussed: Experiential and cooperative learning, connection to the student's life, and becoming a better citizen. It provides some examples of teaching and learning to demonstrate how those tenets would be put into practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century art education in the lower and middle schools.

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I have been experiencing the world and learning through the arts my whole life as a visual and kinesthetic learner. I am a practicing artist and have been passionate about making art since the age of three. After receiving a Master of Fine Arts degree in Textile Design, I worked as the Executive Director of a non-profit arts center. I began teaching at that time as well, which gave me the opportunity to explore creative learning styles and engage blossoming young minds. I enjoyed teaching so much, I decided to switch careers and went back to school to get a Master's degree in Education. I've been teaching elementary school art since 1996. It is a joy and honor to share my passion for art with the children I teach.

In my current position of Fine Arts Department Chairperson and as one of the art educators at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, our mission is to ignite and nurture an enduring spirit of scholarship, curiosity, creativity, and confidence. We value learning experientially, exhibiting kindness, and honoring diversity. The Lab School was founded by John Dewey in 1896.

The main tenets of Dewey's philosophy:

- 1) **Experiential learning**, hands on learning is the way children learn best.
- 2) Activities have to be **connected to student lives** and student interests.
- 3) Activities engage the student in **becoming a better citizen** and learn to **cooperate with others**.

Here are a few examples of how I approach this philosophy.

### **Experiential learning**

#### **University of Chicago Connections**

Third-grade students are curious about dinosaurs. We have a professor at the University of Chicago who has discovered many famous dinosaur bones, so I developed a project in collaboration with the Dinosaur Professor and the third grade homeroom teacher. We begin this project with a visit to the University of Chicago's fossil lab. The students go to see and touch real dinosaur bones. We

discover that some dinosaurs had feathers!

### **Experiential and Cooperative Learning**

The students then worked cooperatively to create drawings of two dinosaur heads, one male and one female. Professor Sereno made a cast of the Rajasaurus bones he found in India. The students learn how to use epoxy clay to create the skin covering the bone. Together the students discussed ways to finish the dinosaur with scales and feathers and paint colors.

### **Architecture and the Surrounding Neighborhood**

In the spring quarter of fourth grade, I've been teaching an architecture unit, and I always start this unit with a field trip downtown. Chicago is known for its amazing architecture. It has a rich and varied history in the development of modern architecture, so I partner with the Chicago Architecture Foundation and take my students on a walking field trip to see the spectacular skyscrapers and world class buildings of downtown Chicago. We see classical architecture at the Art Institute, contemporary architecture at the Harold Washington Library, and modern architecture in the Federal Plaza with the Mies Van der Rohe buildings.

We begin the field trip in the lobby of Chicago Architecture Foundation where we look at a three dimensional map of downtown Chicago. We talk about the history of rebuilding Chicago after the great Chicago fire. We discuss the materials used such as terra-cotta and steel and the invention of the skyscraper.

Outside, our field trip continues in front of famous buildings. We discuss the architectural elements of those buildings and have the students draw them. They learn vocabulary words such as pediment, columns, capitals, and acroteria. Another highlight of the trip is when we visit the Harold Washington Library, named after Chicago's first African American mayor.

During our exploration we can't help but notice all the public art that is scattered throughout the downtown streets. It is a city ordinance that new construction projects

include 1% of their budget for public art. In the Federal Plaza, students learn about modern architect Mies Van der Rohe and artist Alexander Calder. The students learn about public art and the importance of having it in a place where all people can engage with the sculpture. In order to absorb and process the richness of these diverse constructions, the students take time to draw and discuss what they are seeing. Although most of my students have been downtown before, our trip makes these familiar sights new and fresh to them as they begin to develop an eye and a lexicon for style, structure, and detail.

When we go back to school, students are now ready to see their own neighborhood in a new way. The Laboratory Schools are located in Hyde Park, a neighborhood on the south-side of Chicago. The original structures in the neighborhood were built during the Victorian era. Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie house is located auspiciously one block away from our school! The students have a natural interest in knowing more about the buildings in their neighborhood, so we do a comparative study between Victorian style architecture and Prairie style architecture. The students learn about the difference in style, emphasis, and ornamentation.

We go on a field trip to the Robie House that was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1908. The students toured the interior and exterior of the building and learn about its unique features. It is a living museum and a quintessential example of Prairie style architecture. The students spend time drawing the building, live on site. We followed this with two weeks of drawing in the classroom to finish the lesson. This lesson ties in with their math lesson on geometry, as I am able to coordinate an integrated curriculum with other teachers.

### **Connection to Student Lives**

Next in the architecture unit for fourth grade, I have a guest speaker from the Obama Foundation visit with my students. The future presidential library will be located in a park near the Laboratory Schools. We discuss the rule for architecture: form follows function. My students

brainstorm all the different ways that the new presidential library could function, and then connect those ideas with their own creative architectural visions for the facility. The students sketch out their ideas for the future Obama Presidential Library Center. Among the ideas are a gallery, library, museum, activity room, screening room, and café! Using recycled materials, the students begin to build their ideas for the presidential library as three-dimensional models. We put these models on display for an exhibit at the end of the school year.

This year, representatives from The Obama Foundation came back to visit the students and interview them about their ideas for the future library. This was an exciting opportunity for students to see their ideas about architecture play a role beyond the classroom. The students shared with the Project Manager from the Obama Foundation and with the younger students from the early childhood education campus.

### **Becoming a better citizen**

#### **Gordon Parks Arts Hall**

In 2014, the George Lucas Family Foundation gave \$25 million to the Laboratory Schools for a new arts hall. George Lucas and his wife, financial executive Mellody Hobson, requested the building be named in honor of Gordon Parks, the American photographer, film director, and social justice advocate. We are proud to be the first building on the U of C campus named after an African American.

With the opening of the arts hall came the opportunity to teach about the significant artistic contributions of Gordon Parks. I chose to build a curriculum based upon his social justice advocacy. It is known around the world that Chicago has a gun violence problem. It is always in our news and we are at a teachable time in 2016 where it is critical to have conversations about the complex issues our city is dealing with. I chose to use this Gordon Parks quote to inspire my students: "I picked up my camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe; racism,

intolerance, and poverty.”

In the Arts Hall, the opening exhibition in our gallery was 13 original photographs by Gordon Parks. It gave us the opportunity to have the children come into the gallery, study the photographs, and respond to the artwork.

### **Connecting to Student Interests**

In the middle school curriculum, we focus on developing the student’s individual artistic voice. So they are prepared when, in seventh grade, I introduce Gordon Park’s work and ask the students to consider a social justice issue that they were willing to take a stand for. I wanted to know what was important to them and have them create a protest poster to represent that idea. The students choose issues such as: peace, non-violent protest, environment, equality, oil drilling, wage increase, animal rights, and gun violence. In this lesson the students were forming their identities and expressing their passions while simultaneously learning about compositional layout and design using the principles of design.

### **Visual Literacy in the 21st-century**

The middle school art program focuses on visual literacy in the 21st-century. Students are bombarded by visual imagery every day on the computer, on their iPhones, on TV, in advertisements, in newspapers and magazines. Students need to learn how to analyze and interpret the visual imagery so they can shift from being consumers to being creators of visual imagery.

In the eighth grade visual arts program, the students are asked to be a curator for a day. They must select a theme for the exhibition, the artist to support that idea, build the model of the exhibition, and present it to class.

I take the eighth-grade students on a field trip to an art gallery to meet with the curator and find out what that job entails. In the Fall of 2015, the students were at the University of Chicago’s Logan Arts Center viewing an exhibition about Borders/Boundaries. After a rich discussion about our gallery experience, the students were asked to look at these essential questions while

conceptualizing their own exhibition:

What do you want to communicate to the audience?

What imagery will you select to support that idea?

The students are then given guidelines for being a Curator:

- 1) Select a theme
- 2) Research your idea
- 3) Select the artists to support that theme
- 4) Design a model for your exhibit
- 5) Build model
- 6) Write research paper
- 7) Present Gallery and paper to class

Some of the galleries that the students created were on the following subjects: Waste/recycled materials, MC Escher, fractal art, illustration art, Peter Bloom, Ai Wei Wei, Bridget Riley, and Charles Schultz work featuring the Peanuts cartoons.

### **Connection to Student Lives**

Sixty percent of our student population is affiliated with the University of Chicago. Our students are the youngest members of University of Chicago’s academic community. Many of the student’s parents work at this Hyde Park campus.

In our eighth-grade art curriculum, we teach perspective drawing. I take the students on a walking field trip of the University of Chicago campus. I asked them to photograph the buildings that they find interesting. Then they must select one building to do further studies and an architectural drawing.

The students must create a composition that is half drawing and half painting. They have the freedom to paint in any style and choose any part of the picture to be drawn in pencil. The students spend six weeks on these drawings and are engaged in weekly critiques of their progress. The results show their understanding of perspective, light, and shadow.

These are examples of Dewey education in action at the Laboratories Schools. The student’s learning is based

on their interests and the environment around them. They are engaged in activities to further develop those interests. They work in cooperative groups to create art projects together. They are engaged in discovering their artistic voice and becoming better citizens in the world.

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