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Arts & Crafts

Art and culture study: balancing student interest and community focus

In a fascinating case study, **Jacqueline Cossetino** and **Keith Whitescarver** describe one US Montessori elementary teacher's dynamic approach to art in and out of the classroom.

Ensuring the arts play an appropriate role in the Montessori elementary program can be a challenge, especially for teachers aiming to respect the Montessori principle of individualized, interest-driven study. Many schools rely on art specialists to deliver a stand-alone curriculum. Others maintain open studios, which are treated much like libraries – as resources for classroom-based research.

One teacher, in Williamsburg, Virginia, has moved the studio into her classroom and art into the center of student work.

The Williamsburg Montessori School's Upper Elementary environment is located in a restored home adjacent to Colonial Williamsburg (www.history.org/), a living museum of Colonial American history that highlights political events surrounding the American Revolution in the town that was the capital of the Virginia colony. In addition to the political, Colonial Williamsburg also provides a rich depiction of colonial social and cultural life, including textiles and costumes, decorative arts, folk art, and music. The setting of a living museum is, in many ways, a metaphor for Lisa Blackford's approach to arts integration.

Art and Culture

Central to Ms Blackford's approach is an organic understanding of culture study. As organized by Montessori, the cultural subjects – history, literature, geography, geometry, and science – emerge as disciplines inspired by our collective need to make sense of the human condition and our connection to the natural world. At the center of that work is the desire for expression.

In every time period and in every culture, art has served that purpose.

In Blackford's classroom, Cultural Study follows a three year-cycle that is, in part, driven by student interest and in part by broad, interdisciplinary topics that Blackford plans far in advance. Topics such as "Early Humans," "Ancient Cultures," or "American History" constitute a spine for each year's study. From those broad topics students derive individualized strands for extended practice and independent research.

A central strand for each topic is art and artist study. When studying American history, for instance, American art and artists are featured and local exhibits are used when possible. "Painters and Paintings of the Early American South," to give one example, is on view from March 23, 2013 through September 7, 2014 in the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum in Colonial Williamsburg. The exhibit is heavy on portraits, primarily those of the Virginia slave owning elite, including two of George Washington in uniform. While portraiture was the predominant genre of much of that period, and was extremely popular among the southern elite, the exhibit also includes landscapes, seascapes,



Painting the Van Gogh in sections

pictures made by naturalists and explorers of North America, and a remarkable image that depicts the life of enslaved Africans. The exhibit is a tremendous resource for use during a study of colonial America.

Art is also naturally woven into the study of disciplines other than history. Inspired by drawings of 18th and 19th century naturalists, students in Blackford's class link art to the study of Botany. "We draw what we see under the microscope in addition to taking our sketch books outside to sketch plant life. We regularly sketch our garden, where the children are often working to care for our vegetables. So, the children experience the garden and outdoor environment through many different lenses or perspectives", notes Blackford.

Using different media is another element of the work of this class. During their three year cycle, students also gather knowledge of techniques and tools of art making: calligraphy to watercolor, pastels to print making – artists aren't always the main feature of a given lesson. "When we studied world religions," Blackford explains, "the children once made a quilt, by creating applique squares (one for each child) with a symbol representative of a world

Michelangelo exhibit at Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD



religion we had studied (for example a yin-yang symbol for Taoism or a cross for Christianity). They learned the applique techniques during this study.”

She sums up her goals: “I want them to ultimately not see art as a separate subject at school, but as something that is part of how we exist as human beings.”

Preparing the environment for imaginative work

Blackford is meticulous about keeping her classroom prepared for artistic pursuits. She maintains well stocked shelves with an array of media, including pastel, watercolor and acrylic paint and brushes, charcoal, ink/pen, print making brayers, as well as a large selection of different types of paper.

“The materials are never taken away or brought out for special occasions, rather they are just a constant feature in our classroom.”

Formal art study takes place every Friday afternoon for two hours. Lessons consist of art history and art making techniques, and once the concepts have been introduced and practiced,

“I want them to ultimately not see art as a separate subject at school, but as something that is part of how we exist as human beings.” Lisa Blackford

“students return to their work throughout the week, much as they would math or language work.”

While the broad topics guiding the cultural curriculum suggest genres and styles, the selection of artists is determined in a variety of ways. Studies often depend on available exhibits at nearby museums. Blackford explains, “After seeing an exhibit on Cubism, the students were so enthralled that I decided to provide a unit on that – I was surprised how interested they were, but they were, so I incorporated that into our curriculum.”

Art and community

In respecting the characteristics and tendencies of the child in the second plane of development, Blackford regards

Picasso painting lesson



all of the work in the Upper Elementary classroom to be in support of the community. And for the child between nine and twelve, the community refers to the close bonds that hold the classroom together as well as the world outside the school. For Blackford, art is a powerful bridge to both.

In addition to making frequent trips to local museums, libraries, and other cultural attractions within walking distance to the classroom, Blackford’s students are frequent contributors to

are used as educational tools that provide insight into a subject, but more than that, they are a way for students to use imagination to understand reality while exploring the vastness of human culture.

Just as important, however, art study and art making become part of individual student growth and development. In the words of Blackford, “What I especially enjoy seeing are students who come into the classroom without an inclination to

Williamsburg’s growing gallery scene. At least once a year, the class curates a show of their work for public display. Exhibits have taken place at the public library, a local café, and in an annual arts festival sponsored by the city of Williamsburg. These processes take the students through the full cycle of creative expression – from inspiration to research, to technique development, to production, and, finally, to exhibition.

Lisa Blackford’s classroom is a superb example of how art study can become intertwined with the Cultural Curriculum. Students view and make art in ways that are organic and that highlight Maria Montessori’s cosmic vision of education. In the words of Camillo Grazzini, “Cosmic education responds to the specific developmental characteristics and needs of the human being during the second plane of development: for example, using the imagination to understand reality, realities beyond the reach of the physical senses; striving for mental and moral independence; exploring the vastness of culture; forming a particular kind of society; and so on.”

For Miss Lisa, as she is known to her students, art viewing and art making

explore art, and who might say things like, ‘I can’t draw,’ do, in fact, explore art. They enjoy the exploration process and the study of how art is used in culture. In addition they end up discovering abilities for artistic expression that they didn’t know they had, developing confidence in their own abilities to create.”

For more on Lisa Blackford’s approach, see D’Neil and Michael Duffy’s 2002 volume, *Children of the Universe: Cosmic Education in the Montessori Elementary Classroom*.

Bibliography:

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Art in cultural work

