

Teaching the Language of Art at Blake

By Jodi C. Auvin

“I see all of my students as artists whether they do or not,” says Kathy Grundei, Middle School visual arts teacher. “They’re always wondering how to take something apart and put it back together again. The marks they make and the manner in which they put things together are unique to each child. That’s being an artist.”

Blake’s arts curriculum gives students every opportunity to cultivate the artist within. Like its founding institutions, The Blake School believes so firmly in the intrinsic value of the arts and their role in helping students succeed in life that art is part of the School’s mission: “Students are expected to participate in an integrated program of academic, artistic and athletic activities in preparation for college, lifelong learning, community service and lives as responsible world citizens.” As a result, every student from Pre-K through 12 participates in a wealth of arts classes and activities designed to cultivate age-appropriate talents as well as an appreciation of the artistic process and the role of arts in society.

“We ensure that every child has significant experiences in rich and varied arts disciplines,” says Assistant Head of School Lisa Lyle. “Moreover, our curriculum responds to where children are developmentally.” One example is the



Donna Bill, Blake campus Lower School strings teacher, plays a piece with her violin students during their ensemble session.

Middle School arts requirement of industrial arts (shop), a program that has been in place at Blake since the 1920s. “Students love it,” Lyle says, “and alums remember it fondly. Many still have the lamps and stools they made.”

In his article “The Arts at Blake” (see page 2), Head of School John Gulla puts it this way: “From the first days of pre-kindergarten, throughout the Lower and Middle Schools, and into our elective programs in Upper School, Blake students are singing, acting, drawing, painting, playing instruments, and in many other ways making art.” Fortunately for Blake students, so are their teachers. “All of our teachers are quite accomplished,” says Lyle. “Each is, in his or her own right, a practicing artist. No one is teaching visual art or music who doesn’t create, play or have a strong vocal instrument themselves.”

Experience at work

Donna Bill, who’s been teaching strings in the Lower School since 2002, is one example. She’s been concertmaster of the Minnetonka Symphony for 11 seasons. “I like the complement of practicing and playing myself and the pedagogical side,” she says.

Strings classes are held once a week for 30–35 minutes, and class size is generally three children. “Strings cover a wide range of mental processes,” says Bill. “CAT scans show what’s involved in the brain, including coordination skills, big motor skills with the bow arm, and small coordination with fingers. There’s a lot going on: focus and attention skills, auditory skills, language skills, and being able to read and remember music.”

Kristin Nelson has been teaching art in the Lower School since 1974. “I’m certified to teach K–12, but once I started with small children, I never wanted to teach any other,” she says. “They’re so fresh. Artists work their whole lives trying to regain the vision that children have.”

A student making music experiences the “simultaneous engagement of senses, muscles, and intellect. Brain scans taken during musical performances show that virtually the entire cerebral cortex is active while musicians are playing.” Different areas of the brain perform different functions from directing movement, to thinking, to feeling, to remembering, including many sub-regions within those areas that relate to more specialized activities. Making music engages, and is increasingly seen to strengthen, a vast array of brain power.

Source: Educational Leadership, November, 1998, p.38
 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
 Article: The Music in Our Minds
 Norman M. Weinberger, Professor of Psychobiology at the
 University of California, Irvine

Nelson says art is a haven for many students because there are no wrong answers. She's also quick to say that her students teach her more than she teaches them. "When I started teaching Pre-K, I designed a wonderful lesson that totally bombed," she says with a laugh. "I learned you don't impose an art lesson on a 4-year-old. Now I talk with their teachers about what they're doing, then design an activity based on that. If they're talking about harvest and things that grow, I design a lesson that involves rolling leaves, sticks and bark into clay slabs, then draping that over rocks to make bowls."

In third, fourth and fifth grade, students learn about the language of art, and lessons are based on the elements: line, shape, color, form and texture. "I'm not trying to make artists out of them," says Nelson. "I'm trying to make them into people who look at the world with aesthetic awareness. Today we were drawing a still life; they all drew the same thing but from very different perspectives. And we start every class by looking at a reproduction or piece of art, providing an opportunity to teach the language of art, visual thinking strategies and respect for others' ideas."

Blake campus Lower School music teacher Jay Broeker also appreciates his young students' enthusiasm. "I get them while they're fresh," he says. "By the time they reach fourth or fifth grade, I know them and what they're capable of well."

Broeker, who's been at Blake since 1999 and has taught



Art teachers Carol Tombers (pictured) and Kristin Nelson share the responsibility of teaching Blake campus Lower School students to look at the world with aesthetic awareness.

at both elementary school and college levels, is trained in Orff Schulwerk, or Music for Children, an approach to music education conceived by German composer Carl Orff. It's based on the belief that the easiest way to teach music is to draw out students' inherent affinities for rhythm and melody and allow these to develop in natural ways. Adult pressure and mechanical drill are discouraged. "We begin

with simple rhymes or games," says Broeker, "then take the rhythm of speech and transfer that to drums or xylophones rather than teaching a pre-composed speech. As the rhythm changes, it changes how the body moves."

In fifth grade, another significant step takes place: the students start choir, the first time all 42 of them are put together. "It's a prelude to the fifth grade play," says Broeker, referring to the annual production through which students participate in the entire process of putting together a play. "They start learning that we all sink or float together. They come to understand that some people are in leadership roles, others are in supportive roles, and that everyone has something to contribute. They can drop lines or forget notes, but to see them recover and support one another is amazing."

The affect of the individual on the group is reinforced in Middle and Upper School instrumental music classes. "Kids go through a whole school day in and out of classes as an individual," says Brian Olson, who teaches band at both the Middle and Upper Schools. "When they do math, their performance on any given lesson probably

The Arts Living on Through Alums

Editor's Note: As a way to acknowledge the legacy of arts at the School, we asked alumni to write in about their arts experiences and how those experiences have impacted their work and life. The following are two of the responses to this inquiry.

From Christopher Meeks '72

I'm writing this a few days from the publication of my produced play "Who Lives?" a drama that has to do with the first fully functioning kidney dialysis machine in Seattle in the early 1960s and the doctors wanting to test it on people. Of the hundreds of thousands of people dying of kidney disease then, 12 could be saved. Which twelve?

This play's genesis stretches all the way back to Blake and my eighth grade English class with John Hatch in 1968. One of the first books we read was a play,

"Inherit the Wind" by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. Mr. Hatch loved every word, and it came across. The drama stunned me, even if it must have been written by old dead guys. Magically, years later in the 1980s, I interviewed Lawrence and Lee for Writers' Digest, and Bob Lee became one of my absolute best friends and a mentor. In fact, "Who Lives?" is dedicated to Bob Lee.

Another fabulous influence at Blake was Walt McCarthy for English. I loved his laugh and the sense that English was fun. I can't say my college English teachers brought about that sense of fun — in fact they killed the



Chris Meeks '72, photo by Brant Kingman '72

doesn't affect anyone but them. But in performing arts classes, how they're feeling on any given day and what they're willing to put into the lesson affects the outcome of the group as a whole."

Jazz Express is a prime example. "It's for Upper School students who are serious about playing jazz; they have to audition," he says. "And because the group meets at 7:30 on Friday morning, they have to like it. Jazz Express offers the chance to play in professional situations — for events, parties, things like that. We travel out of state and do one jazz festival a year. And we've recorded CDs."

Olson composes when the muse strikes him. "Every year I find an excuse to write something for the kids at school," he says. "This fall, I composed a piece for band. As I was writing it, I used it as a workshop piece with the Upper School band. I could tweak it and find out what the kids liked. They played the whole piece, which we recorded and sent to the publisher. It's another insight for students into what a composer does."

Dan LeJeune, a choral teacher in the Middle School since 1999, is known for his work with adolescent voices. He does guest conducting for various choirs around the country, leads workshops on emerging voice, and teaches summer graduate courses at St. Thomas University. "I love taking kids from a child's voice through the stages that bring them to an emerging adult voice," he says. "The change can be dramatic. I'll have sixth grade boys leave in May as altos and return in September as baritones."



Brian Olson, who teaches both Middle and Upper School band students, says that performing arts classes show students how their individual efforts can affect the group as a whole.

One of the notable aspects of the Middle School choirs is their structure. The sixth grade choir is limited to students in that grade. "They're acclimating to Middle School and to one another," LeJeune says. "This gives us a chance to eliminate an overwhelming piece."

That shifts in seventh and eighth grades, when choirs are combined. "Musical maturity isn't based on age," explains LeJeune. "Some seventh graders are better than eighth graders and vice versa. Combining them reduces differences, enhances abilities, and teaches them to work with people who are younger and older." That being said, single-gender choirs are available in both seventh and



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subject for me, so the fact I now teach college English is ironic. Mr. McCarthy oversaw my independent study of filmmaking my senior year, which led to filmmaking as my major in college. When I didn't have a stinking film permit in Los Angeles for shooting a short film and I was stopped, writing led to being a passion. You don't need a permit for that. Walt might get his hearty laugh cranked up with my book, "The Middle-Aged Man and the Sea."

Bill Fisher, without a doubt, had to be the weirdest and best teacher for showing how art can fit into one's daily life. He made speech class a place to be different and "perform." The best speeches are as affecting as any great actor, no? Mr. Fisher's speech class is surely embedded in my DNA, and my son Zack is probably reaping the benefit of Bill, too.

These fine men might not normally be associated with "art," but indeed they are artists of the best sort, leading me to see the art of language.

From Kate Hersey Dickerson '74

Northrop (and to a small extent, Blake) really influenced my direction in the arts.

I practically lived in the art room from fifth through twelfth grades, where Fran McGoffin was truly my mentor. She was patient and excited about teaching me techniques of drawing and painting over the years. She even took it upon herself to teach me some art history as a special tutorial during study hall periods. This was her suggestion, though I didn't care for it, preferring studio hands-on art. However, when I got to Connecticut College and signed up for Art History 101, there was the same textbook Mrs. McGoffin had introduced me to! I regret that, being a self-focused teenager at the time, I probably did not adequately express my appreciation for all her help and enthusiasm.

When I was in seventh grade, Mrs. Bryan offered to buy one of my paintings, which she hung in her dining

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eighth grades. “It’s becoming known that single-gender choirs are helpful in these grades,” says LeJeune. “Blake has been ahead of other schools in that we’ve long offered this. Many schools are forced to have single-gender choirs in one grade only. Our schedule allows for both.”

Regardless of grade, LeJeune takes full advantage of technology. For example, he’s in his third year of recording students digitally to get samples of their singing, a tremendous asset when working with 160 voices. “I can archive samples on the computer or send them to students via e-mail,” he says. “It’s a way for me and them to track growth.”

Diane Landis has been teaching drama at the Upper School for 13 years and has performed at a number of theaters, including the Children’s Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre and Theatre Exchange in Minneapolis.

“What I appreciate about students is their willingness to take risks about being in front of people and holding forth,” says Landis. “They get a chance to do this a lot in my classes, and it’s something they’ll use in all areas of their lives. Most adults dread public speaking. For students to experience being in front of people regularly and do it better are great gifts for them.”

Last year, the Upper School production of *Les Misérables* was recognized by the SpotLight Musical Theatre Program, which honors high school students who participate and excel in musical theater. “Three outside



Every year the Middle and Upper School drama departments each stage a fall and spring production. Pictured, students perform in “Pirates of Penzance,” this year’s Middle School fall play.

educators critiqued our performances, then sent their critiques to me to share with students,” says Landis. “Students also participated in workshops taught by theater arts professionals.” The cast and crew of this spring’s Upper School musical production, “Beauty and the Beast,” have been selected to participate in the 2006–07 SpotLight Program as well.

Visual arts instructor Bob Teslow is now in his 38th year at the Upper School. “From my first interview, I realized this community found art on

an equal footing with other studies,” says Teslow, a prolific artist whose work is currently on display at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. “I’m totally jazzed every morning knowing I’m going to be challenged by bright young students.”

His enthusiasm is evident. One recent

project involved taking sculpture students to the Walker Art Center, where they conducted a statue-maker game that emulated the work and activities of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Allan Kaprow and Yoko Ono. One student in each group was the statue maker and another was the buyer. Statues were covered with fabric and wrapped à la Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s approach to changing the identity of ordinary or familiar objects. The “activities” of Ono and the “happenings” of Kaprow were reflected in the students’ performances.



This fall, Bob Teslow’s Upper School sculpture students conducted a statue-maker game outside of the Walker Art Center that emulated the work and activities of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Allan Kaprow and Yoko Ono.

Teslow believes deeply in the value of arts for students. “Arts are a significant component to a liberal arts education,” he says. “Without exposure to the arts, you won’t have a well-rounded background of experiences or exposures to concepts and ideas needed to be successful in life or in a chosen area of study.”

It’s a topic Kathy Grundei knows well. In addition to teaching art in the Middle School since 1992, she’s been actively involved with the Perpich Center for Arts Education (PCAE) for 10 years.

PCAE is an agency of the state of Minnesota and a unique organization of national stature representing Minnesota’s dedication to excellent education. Its mission is to improve K–12 education for all Minnesota students and educators through innovative programs and partnerships centered in the arts. PCAE is located on a 30-acre campus in Golden Valley, which also houses the PCAE library, Professional Development and Research, and the Arts High School.



Blake students start learning the language of art during their earliest days at the School.

“I’ve been on committees that looked at the articulation of what K–12 art education should look like, its purpose, and how to talk about the arts in a way that has clarity for everyone,” says Grundei. She’s also worked on curriculum projects, assessments and best practices of teaching in arts classrooms.

Grundei recently scaled back her teaching schedule to 60 percent to give more time to PCAE. “Blake was fully supportive of my doing this,” she says. “A great deal of my work with Perpich has to do with standards as they’re being implemented in public schools. Perpich is going into school districts and working with teachers, bringing forth what research is showing about arts education, particularly in the process of curriculum review. We’re all interested in making sure our kids can be successful. All kids should have access to good arts programming.”

Grundei says that over the years, one of the biggest changes is the assessment of art education. “For years, it was thought the arts couldn’t be assessed,” she says. “The work we’ve done clearly demonstrates otherwise.”

The impact of arts education on learning

Increasingly, controlled studies reveal a powerful, positive relationship between study in the arts and other academic subjects, attitudes and behaviors.

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) is a national coalition of more than 140 arts, education, business, philanthropic and government organizations that demonstrates and promotes the essential role of the arts in the learning and development of every child in the improvement of America’s schools. Formed in 1995, AEP has become the primary forum and meeting ground for organizations to explore how the arts can transform American education.

A recent compendium of the AEP, “Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development,” summarizes and discusses 62 research studies that examine the effects of arts learning on students’ social and academic skills. A small sampling of highlights from “Critical Links” and other key national research findings on the impact of arts on social and academic skills are cited here.

Research conducted between 1987 to 1998 indicates that young people working in the arts for at least three

hours, three days a week for at least one full year are more likely to do well academically, specifically:

- Four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement
- Three times more likely to be elected to class office
- Four times more likely to participate in a math and science fair
- Three times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- Four times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem

(Source: Dr. Shirley Brice Heath, Standard University, for Carnegie Foundation for The Advancement of Teaching)

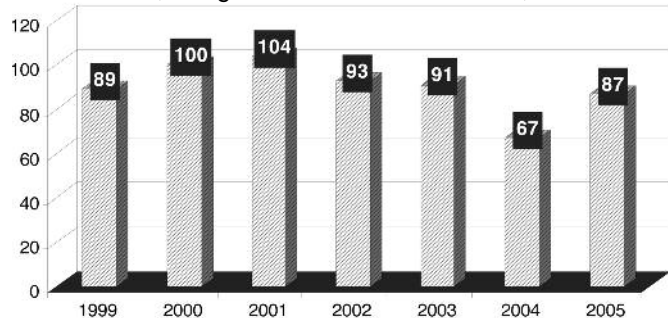
Young artists, as compared with their peers, are likely to:

- Attend music, art and dance classes nearly three times as frequently
- Participate in youth groups nearly four times as frequently
- Read for pleasure nearly twice as often
- Perform community service more than four times as often

(Source: Americans for the Arts)

There’s more. Arts education has a tremendous impact on the developmental growth of children and helps level the “learning field” across socio-economic boundaries. And according to the College Board, high school students who take four years of arts and music classes have higher SAT scores than students with one-half year or less.

Arts Students Outperform Non-Arts Students on SAT
(Average Points Better on Test Scores)



Source: College Board, 2005. 2005 College-bound seniors: total group profile.

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TEN

General Lessons the Arts Teach Children

- 1 To make good judgments about qualitative relationships
- 2 That problems can have more than one solution
- 3 To celebrate multiple perspectives
- 4 That in complex forms of problem solving, purposes are seldom fixed, but change with circumstance and opportunity
- 5 That neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we know

- 6 That small differences can have large effects
- 7 To think through and within material
- 8 Constructive ways to say what cannot be said
- 9 That the arts offer experience we can have from no other source, and
- 10 That the arts’ position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important

Source: Learning and the Arts: Crossing Boundaries, 2000, p. 14; Article: Ten lessons the Arts Teach Professor of Education Elliot Eisner, Stanford University

Art education also shapes the workforce of tomorrow

The value of art and its positive impact doesn't end when formal education does. Arts education also develops the skills and habits of mind that are important for workers in the new "Economy of Ideas" (Alan Greenspan). According to the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills 2000 Report, arts education is linked with economic realities, including the assertion that young people who learn the rigors of planning and production in the arts will be valuable employees in the idea-driven workplace of the future.

The reason? Exposure to the arts strengthens students' problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. It hones a sense of goal setting and quality task performance — skills required in the classroom and beyond. It also helps students to develop a positive work ethic and pride in a job well done and to be more appreciative and understanding of the world around them.

Completing the circle

Not only does arts education foster an able workforce, it sometimes leads to careers in art.

"Five years ago, I was asked to be on a committee to find a piece of artwork for the Upper School campus," says Bob Teslow. "We decided that a piece of artwork just sitting there wouldn't have the same impact as one that relates to the community. We did a search for an artist and chose Charles Fuller, a 1981 Blake graduate who became an artist. Fuller and I have collaborated quite a bit together. He replaced a chain link fence on



Upper School visual arts instructor Bill Colburn '88 says that teaching students to see the world with their own eyes is the crux of painting and drawing and the thing that defines all classes at Blake.

Kenwood Parkway with a vine-like structure. Every senior has a twig cast in iron that bears his or her name and year of graduation, which was my idea. So far, four years of classes are represented."

Upper School visual arts instructor Bill Colburn is a 1988 Blake graduate and former student of Teslow's.

"After graduating from Northwestern with a major in painting, I worked in a warehouse," he says. "Then Bob called and asked if I would sub for his classes for a week or two. I had so much fun, I started looking for a teaching job."

His search led to a teaching job at a school in Honolulu, then another in Washington D.C. "That time was pivotal," he notes. "I realized that I saw myself as a teacher." That's when he got a call about an opening at Blake.

"Something unique to the visual arts is that we make things with our hands and craft them well," says Colburn. "It's so real and important that we do this, create palpable objects rather than just thinking of or writing about ideas."

Colburn's instruction doesn't stop once an artwork is complete. "The last step of the process is to present your work," he says. "I try to have every student display every piece he or she makes."

What makes Blake so special? "In all our classes, we teach students to see the world with their own eyes," says Colburn. "It's a close read of a text or an objective observation in science class. It's certainly the crux of painting and drawing." And, obviously, of Blake's arts curriculum as a whole. 🐾

The Arts Living on Through Alums, continued

room. She had been my headmistress in Lower School — what a psychological boost for me!

Barbara Reynolds, through her French classes, also introduced us to so much art and the art of living through her French classes. I will never forget the shock of actually seeing THE Louvre Museum, with THE Mona Lisa, on our school trip to France with Mrs. Reynolds in the spring of 1973.

There was also an English assignment, probably with Mrs. Singer, in about eighth grade, which played a role in my future in the arts. We had to interview someone in a career that interested us and then write a paper about that career. I interviewed the late Bob Lenox, our neighbor and decorator, who told me things about the business of decorating that I still reference today as a

decorator.

Finally, Bob Teslow was an influence beginning in my junior year, as Northrop and Blake were beginning co-ordinated classes between our two campuses. He opened up my world to modern art techniques with silkscreen and metal sculpture.

When I got to college, I ended up triple majoring in art, art history and French, all of which continued to mold my future passions. Today, besides being a painter/muralist, I am now an interior designer with a retail shop selling European influenced articles for the home. I truly mean it when I say I wouldn't be where I am without Fran McGoffin, Barbara Reynolds and Bob Teslow ... and I do think about their influences frequently!