



Photos courtesy of Boston Arts Academy

Through the Lens of ART

By integrating their study of art, academics, and life, Boston Arts Academy students experience the joys and responsibilities of becoming citizens of the world.

Linda Nathan

When the Boston Arts Academy opened five years ago as a pilot public high school for the visual and performing arts, its teachers, parents, students, and community members envisioned a school where students would engage in sustained, rigorous study of an art form—music, dance, theater, or visual arts—and traditional academic subjects, including the humanities, science, math, and world languages. We wanted to teach an appreciation of the role of art in society. Since then, we have actively sought

ways to understand the world through the lens of art.

We know that drama, for example, can be an excellent vehicle for making direct, emotional connections with history. Watching an August Wilson play, we find ourselves living the lives of his African American characters as he takes us from decade to decade in 20th century Pittsburgh. And plays by García Lorca or Brian Friel have the power to transport us to other lands, other cultures, and other realities.

How did we go about implementing our vision in a high school? How well has it worked?

Living China

In our second year, our 10th graders spent the first four months of school intensively studying ancient and modern China up to the Communist revolution of 1949. Their study culminated in an exhibition entitled “China Lives!” The exhibition demonstrated their understanding of Chinese culture, art, politics, family life, history, and economics from the Tang to the Qing dynasties and through the turbulent first half of the 20th century.

The China study exposed our students to a world that was foreign to almost all of them. Of our 250 students

that year, only three were of Asian origin.

Our dancers immersed themselves in ancient and modern dance forms from China and Hong Kong. They were learning kinesthetically with their bodies—but also with their heads and hearts. By performing these pieces, they learned the connections between the history of the Maoist regime and the kinds of dance that China's government glorified, or banned, during that period.

All the 10th graders came to appreciate complex issues about the particular dynasty they studied, but the dancers also experienced an emotional connection to the material.

The dance teacher, Fernandina Chan, born in Hong Kong, choreographed dances for her students that reflected her own experiences in Asia. It did not matter, we all learned, that almost all the dancers were not Asian. The final dance of "China Lives!" described the reunification of China with Hong Kong, and those dancers experienced a transforming sense of power and expressiveness as their bodies brought to life their teacher's story.

A Four-Year Humanities Sequence

We took many lessons from "China Lives!" and other early experiments. From those first explorations, we developed a semester-long course on immigration as part of our humanities program. Last year, our theater students worked with a professional playwright to dramatize immigrants' stories drawn from our students' own lives and backgrounds.

Our visual arts students explored artist and printmaker Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, which chronicled the

migration of African Americans from the South to the North. First, students learned to feel the texture of his paintings by copying Lawrence's images in clay; next, they expressed in painting the struggles of their individual immigrant backgrounds through a color palate that symbolically told the story; finally, they incorporated Lawrence's brushstroke techniques in their own work.



Dance students at the Boston Arts Academy study the Chinese dance forms that they will perform for the "China Lives!" exhibition.

This interdisciplinary curricular study in theater, visual arts, dance, and music grew into a full-fledged touring production called "Fresh Flags," which reflected the students' struggles with patriotism and the experience of otherness. Their essential question: How do we live, survive, and celebrate diversity in the United States while acknowledging the pain and turmoil surrounding us?

We have discovered that to help

students understand world events, such as religious and ethnic warfare, we must study our nation's history, the world's history, and ourselves. Our humanities and writing curriculum provides a framework for this exploration. Its premise is that intense intellectual and artistic study makes us more compassionate and thus better able to participate in our fragile democracy. The arts provide hands-on kinesthetic and visual links to this four-year sequence.

Ninth graders begin with a study of self, first by writing an autobiography, and then by looking closely at World War II and the Holocaust. Delving into Elie Wiesel's masterpiece *Night* (1958/1961)¹ and the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum (www.facing.org), we try to comprehend the incomprehensible—man's inhumanity to man.

This course helps students think and write about who they are and their belief systems and values. It also pushes them from their comfort zone with questions about responsibility for others, the role of the bystander, and how prejudice can turn into genocide.

The four-year humanities sequence includes in-depth study of ancient African civilizations and modern Africa (9th grade), immigration (10th grade), art and ethics (11th grade), and art and aesthetics (12th grade). Students read literature and study history, philosophy, and art to examine the artist's role in society and such ethical issues as capital punishment.

Invent, Connect, Refine, and Own

All seniors have a capstone experience: the senior project. Each project must

respond to a community need by using both artistic and academic skills as well as demonstrate what we call the Boston Arts Academy habits of mind: Invent, Connect, Refine, and Own.

Our habits involve a series of questions.

- **Invent:** What is my passion and how do I use it in my work?
- **Connect:** Who is the audience and how do I connect the work to the audience? How could I interpret or analyze this work?
- **Refine:** What are the strengths and weaknesses of my work? Have I demonstrated good craftsmanship? What tools do I need to improve it?
- **Own:** How does this work affect others? How do I find the drive to go on?

Like the works of any artist, the senior projects must receive critiques from the outside world. In our case, panels of reviewers come from local foundations, colleges, and community agencies and include artists, teachers, and friends of the school. All juniors attend the seniors' project presentations, both to support the graduating class and to develop the habit of critical review. Each project's creator must revise the project until it receives a score of *proficient* from the panel of reviewers.

In the past two years, Boston Arts Academy senior projects have included teaching basic piano to elementary students, providing dance classes at a middle school, restoring a mural at a community arts agency, working with adolescent girls at a community center to create a theater piece on issues of self-esteem and body image, and creating a piece of original music for a new film.

Breathing the Air of Art

Clara's² senior project was to study teen homelessness in Boston and create a theater piece on the basis of her research and in the style of playwright Anna Devere Smith. Clara began her project by volunteering at a local homeless shelter, where she befriended a 16-year-old pregnant girl. Clara learned



Boston Arts Academy students used theater, visual arts, dance, and music to explore the meaning of patriotism in their "Fresh Flags" production.

about the girl's childhood, how her father had abused her, how she had taken to the streets, become addicted to drugs, and then become pregnant.

The audience at Clara's one-woman performance of the finished piece was spellbound. Clara was the homeless girl fending off her father, refusing to admit her own addiction, coming to terms with her pregnancy, and wanting to clean up her life. The piece was brilliantly written and performed.

In her Boston Arts Academy graduation speech, Clara spoke of the role of the artist in society:

Over the course of my short life, I have learned that raw talent or passion does not evolve if it is not constantly nurtured, polished, and properly trained. During my years at Boston Arts Academy, I was adopted and brought up by a caring community where everyone breathed the same air. This air is called art.

This school has demonstrated to me the importance of being not only artistically distinguished but also intellectually proficient. I learned that knowledge is a powerful weapon that can be used to help and change humanity, but that it must be analyzed and owned first. This school

developed artists and scholars that now have the power to stand as individuals and support their own perspectives and beliefs.

She exhorted us to use our art and skill in service to humankind:

Art is the most effective and humane weapon to fight injustice and corruption. Art is the true expression of the human being.

Hatred Rears Its Head

Working with students is never a linear process. Just when we think we have created a school community with a solid sense of tolerance and justice, with students who are able to cross over racial, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, bigotry and hatred rear their ugly heads.

Last spring, the entire school gathered for an emergency assembly. We gathered because someone had drawn a swastika and written "White Power" on the wall of one of the boys' bathrooms.

We decided that we had to interrupt classes. In the assembly, I expressed my outrage and disgust with this act of hate and vandalism. I explained that whoever did this act may have been a coward, a troubled prankster, a hateful

Those seniors gave me faith that although we may not change the entire world, we will send our graduates into it with the power to make it a more just and caring place.

person, or all these things, but that as a community we all needed to take responsibility and respond to it.

An outpouring of emotions, discussion, and ideas followed. Most students were appalled at this invasion into their seemingly safe and caring community. Students wrote and spoke about how their role as artists and scholars placed them in a special position to fight against racism and hatred.

One student wrote,

It is sad having this conversation. Hate is not going to take us anywhere. Hate [created the situation] in Afghanistan and the destruction in New York.

Other students debated whether the term "white power" was more offensive than "black power." Many students shared their own personal experiences with hatred, discrimination, and prejudice.

I worried about the level of emotion that came out in that assembly, but now I believe that it was warranted. If we are to live in a civil society, we must be clear that it is not acceptable to spew hate and that doing so can never be tolerated, at any level. Our students need to hear that message from me as their principal, from their teachers, from their parents and caregivers, and from the leaders of our communities and our nation.

For weeks afterward, students and staff came to me with suggestions for further action. Although this was an isolated incident, racism and bigotry are rampant in the world. I became an educator because I deeply believe in the power that teaching has to win over evil. I believe in the essential goodness of our young people. But I was shaken by this violation.

One day soon after the graffiti

episode, I was buoyed by hope again.

José Massó, a member of our school foundation board and a community leader in Boston, came to speak to the senior class. He related many painful, and sometimes amusing, experiences he had with racism and prejudice when he left his urban home in Puerto Rico to attend a college in rural Ohio. After his talk, the seniors broke into small groups to discuss the significance of Massó's story. I went around and listened.

Our seniors understood that they must withhold judgment until they know a person or a situation. They also knew that although Boston Arts Academy had encouraged them to grow

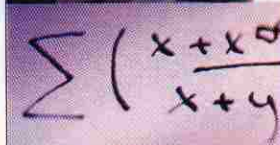
and take risks, life outside of school might not be as kind. Nevertheless, they were prepared to take their place in the world. Those seniors gave me faith that although we may not change the entire world, we will send our graduates into it with the power to make it a more just and caring place.

Our curriculum, in arts and academic classrooms and in studios, has given our students an ability to understand and empathize with differences. Most important, our graduates feel a responsibility to create art that will help the rest of us experience what it means to be a citizen of the world. ■

¹ Wiesel, E. (1958/1961). *Night*. (S. Rodway, Trans.) New York: Hill & Wang.

²This name is a pseudonym.

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