



THE CREATIVE CLASS

ArtCore brings the arts back to five Lane County middle schools

Not often do you hear something like “we had a small philosophical discussion of positive and negative space” in a typical middle school classroom.

But then again, the class that artist and educator Milla Oliviera is explaining isn’t anywhere in the realm of typical. Teaching a room of sixth graders at Cascade Middle School last year, her lesson combined Oregon ecology, Egyptian art and visual cognition to provoke students into thinking about space in completely new ways.

As with most of her lessons, Oliviera concluded the course by having students create work that allowed them to personally express what they had learned.

“I told them to create patterns that expressed who they were, but leave the first letter of their name blank,” Oliviera says. “I want to see who you are through the patterns that you make.”

As one of ArtCore’s original “weavers” (named for their ability to weave arts in with traditional school subjects), Oliviera showcases just what has made the program so invigoratingly nontraditional. ArtCore, a developing arts-integration model for middle schools, dodges easy definition of an arts program: Lessons can take the form of art, science or social studies, if need be.

The connective tissue between Oliviera’s courses and those of her fellow weavers is the use of art to approach each subject.

“Art really offers the kind of problem solving that it takes to question something and to find common ground between subjects,” Oliviera explains. “There’s a sense of

ownership students get out of the lesson when they can create their own work.”

Since launching at Junction City’s Oaklea Middle School in 2014, ArtCore is now set to expand to four other Lane County middle schools — Kelly Middle School, Network Charter School, Hamlin Middle School and Cascade Middle School — thanks to a \$2.2-million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Starting this month, that funding will give Lane County artists with backgrounds in ceramics, theater and writing the chance to weave their work in with an array of school subjects.

“The origins of this really come from Lane Arts Council’s understanding of what the field of educators and students need right now in Lane County and just building on the creative strength of the teaching artists wanting to be involved,” says Liora Sponko, executive director of the Lane Arts Council and ArtCore program director. “It’s the schools that have gotten involved really saying, ‘Yes, this is the direction we want to go.’”

Of course, arts education — both in Lane County and across the country — has long been headed the other direction, with funding drying up for arts classes not focused on boosting test scores. The trick for ArtCore is finding an interdisciplinary approach for students looking to learn outside of textbooks, and for administrators needing to keep up standardized exam standards.

“There’s a lot of room for play and experimentation within the confines of standards,” explains Michelle Sinclair, an ArtCore researcher who will step into the role of weaver this coming term. “As teachers, we need to be thinking about the ways we’re allowing students to learn,”

she says. “You don’t have to color a sheet to understand the diagram of a cell in biology — you could also make it, and maybe that ignites something in your memory that helps you remember that for the test.”

Ross Anderson, ArtCore project manager and senior lead researcher at Eugene’s Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), emphasizes how the organization’s arts education approach fits within many of the school’s existing goals.

“We’re looking at ways to live up to the mission statement of some of these schools,” Anderson says. “So a Kelly Middle School graduate will be innovative, creative, collaborative — these things. That’s awesome, that’s what we need, but how? What parts of their school day are engineered to develop those skills? And that’s what we’re trying to create.”

ArtCore is also aiming to address another key education issue often plaguing students in the program: why it sucks to be in middle school.

“Middle school is this weird thing,” Anderson says. “It was created to give students this transition into high school, so let’s break them into a lot of classes, break up this idea that they get to know a teacher really well and, in a lot of cases, it’s creating the ingredients for students to drop out.”

Art, as Oliviera explains, can give students a means of making the material easier to connect with and, crucially, of providing a space to work out who they are.

“It’s an age when they’re dealing heavily with issues of identity,” Oliviera says. “These projects offer a window that students don’t usually have, to play around and figure themselves out.”

“You hear a lot of sixth graders saying, ‘I can’t do this,’” Sinclair elaborates. “I think these art projects should come as an entry point to say, ‘Well, yes you can.’” She adds: “They don’t come easy; it’s a lot of hard work for everybody, but to learn that perseverance, to make mistakes and it’s OK, that’s huge for a pre-teen looking to build a skill.”

ArtCore’s approach is now beginning to hit a sweet spot with students and educators, offering a fresh approach to prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

“The whole mentality of education as a rigid, skill-building practice doesn’t apply anymore,” Oliviera says. “We’re living through a technological revolution where those sorts of mechanical jobs are being taken over by computers, so what is the kind of thinking that we really need for the problems that we’re facing?”

As the ArtCore projects expand across Lane County middle schools, the concept of learning about ancient Egypt by painting tiles or fractions through African drum rhythms may seem less and less out of the ordinary.

“You don’t need to be a painter to be an artist,” Oliviera says. “People are highly creative every day — when they’re dressing up, when they’re going out and take a different route.” She adds, “It’s figuring out: How do we take that and go deeper?” ■

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