Transforming Education through the Arts and Media: A CCAP initiative to integrate new and digital media into classroom curriculum so that students can succeed in the 21st century. Digital media artists from Columbia College Chicago’s faculty, alumni and students worked with seventh and eighth grade Chicago Public School teachers for four years to co-create classroom residencies that wove together art, technology, media literacy, and academics. The results: students engaged more deeply in their learning, and teachers more confident in incorporating media literacy into their teaching.

“Arts integration is the largest experiment in American arts education, and the arts-rich integration of digital media and curricular content may be the single most innovative and promising part of the nationwide experiment. TEAM is as well designed and beautifully realized an arts/media/subject area project as I have seen anywhere. It is smart on so many levels, and most importantly, it is a savvy catalyst for student learning. Thanks to CCAP at Columbia College Chicago and their partners, to the extraordinary teaching artists and partner teachers, and to the documenters who have captured this project to share with those of us who weren’t lucky enough to be in the room. Thank you for making your great learning available for our important learning.”

Eric Booth, International Arts Learning Consultant, Faculty member at Lincoln Center Education, Juilliard, & The Kennedy Center

“TEAM gives students the opportunity to actually engage, to bring their own questions, interests, doubts, creativity into the learning process...”

Stanley T. Wearden, Ph.D., Senior Vice President and Provost, Columbia College Chicago
I started teaching at Columbia College Chicago in 2010. There were no instructional videos, training manual or 12-step program to teach me how to be a good teacher. My background was in multimedia, my previous experience in retail. Other than some tutoring, I had no teaching experience. A lot of my teaching skills were acquired on the job. I was a graduate of Columbia College Chicago myself, and at 26 I still fit in nicely with the majority of my students. Really, I was more of a peer than a professor. Sure, I’ve made mistakes over the years. Makers are an important part of learning. But my age, as well as being “cut from the same cloth” as my students, made me more relatable. This was perhaps my biggest advantage during my formative years as a teacher. Just like me, my students had also taken a risk and decided to pursue a degree in media arts, instead of taking a more traditional route. Despite the ever-increasing age gap between my students and myself, I still feel that we can relate to each other: we are all adults.

In my 10th year as an adjunct, I was hired by Columbia College Chicago’s Center for Community Arts Partnerships (CCAP) as a teaching artist for their TEAM project. I partnered with a junior-high classroom teacher to co-teach a media arts project to their class. Naturally, there was some initial anxiety on my part. Up to that point, I had only taught college-age students. I was unsure how I could relate to such young students, or get them to take an interest in what I had to say. My anxiety morphed into intimidation on my first day on the job. As a seventh-grade teacher Mr. Cohn was talking about me to his students, I quietly entered the room.

“Hi, hello!” one student shouted, causing 30 pairs of young eyes to fixate on me like some sort of rare Pokemon. I wasn’t sure how to act. Do I say “Hello,” or do I try to sound cool and ask, “What’s up?” (And do kids in 2011 still like Pokemon and say “What’s up?”) Interacting with children wasn’t something I had thought much about.

Fortunately, my trepidation was quickly alleviated. Mrs. Cohn had been a Chicago Public School teacher for about as long as I’d been alive. She reminded me of a veteran cop showing me, the rookie cop, the ropes—a trope used so many times in so many movies and TV shows, but it applied here. Mrs. Cohn quickly helped me become comfortable in working with younger students.

My challenge then was how to teach something as complex as a media arts project to such young students. Efficiency was the key, and time was of the essence. While my college classes are normally three hours long, my time with the junior-high students was around an hour a week. Sometimes, we could only get 45 minutes of time in the computer lab. This forced me to constantly find new, better ways of teaching in my residencies.

The most important concept that I learned over my four years with the TEAM program is that the process is as important as the product when teaching children media arts. In college, that is sometimes true. Usually, though, it is the finished piece—the final film, the completed website—that makes the grade, and not the underlying process that got them there. Unfortunately, the process tends to get overlooked more and more in my coursework with adults. Through trial and error, I have employed several different strategies when teaching junior-high students to make sure they were learning the necessary skills taught in the process—such as media literacy, understanding programming logic, or technical proficiency with the software—as well as accomplishing the larger media arts project.

**Teaching Young Adults: When the Journey Is as Important as the Destination**

BY SAL BARRY

Creativity (Lillard, 2005). “The expectations in rewards or evaluations result in products that are less creative than products produced without those expectations” (pg. 164). On the other hand, American poet T.S. Eliot famously said, “when forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost—and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl.”

In a way, boundaries can set you free. For example, whenever I have to build a website for a client, a company logo or color scheme is a godsend, as it forces me from having to choose colors (and thus those colors subjected to the scrutiny of the client). A few ground rules can give you a big push in the right direction, and free up time to make decisions on other matters.

Somehow, that logic was lost on me when I first attempted to teach color theory to seventh graders. I made the foolhardy mistake of setting as few boundaries as possible. I didn’t want to constrain the potential creativity of my young charges. Normally, when teaching a college course, I set very loose limitations because I want to see where a student will go with a project or assignment if given little direction. When teaching junior-high students, this mindset was problematic.

After a 20-minute lecture and discussion on color theory, I gave my seventh-grade students a line-art drawing of J. Howard Miller’s famous World War II propaganda poster, “We Can Do It!”, affectionately referred to as “Rosie the Riveter.” I asked students to color in the drawing, challenging them to experiment with the various uses of color that we had just discussed.

Unfortunately, this activity backfired. Most concerned themselves with coloring their portraits as close to the original as possible; giving Rosie her familiar red bandana and blue shirt, while placing her in front of a low-background. As many students explained to me that day, they wanted to “do it right” and use the “right” colors.

One year later, I revisited this activity. This time, I was determined to get them to experiment with color, so I took a different approach. I gave the same color theory lecture, and then showed the students a picture of Superman in his famous blue, red and yellow costume. Students were given a line-art drawing of the superhero. Instead of giving them free reign of color choice, they were instead randomly assigned cards with a limited set of color swatches they could use. For example, the secondary color triad of orange, green and violet, black, white, red, complimentary pairs like blue and orange, and so forth. No student was given the primary triad of blue, red and yellow. Some were even challenged to devise an achromatic scheme.

One important step in this process was to support every suggestion made by the students. They would ask if Superman’s boots had to match his cape, as they normally do. They would ask if they had to use every color swatch assigned to them. My answer to these questions was no. This reflects that few students were willing to take risks, even with something as innocuous as a coloring exercise. I asked my teaching assistant and the classroom teacher to agree with any suggestion made by the students in order to encourage risk taking and out of the box thinking. The students, in turn, worked less about “doing it right” and instead were challenged to study color by experimenting with how using different colors would affect the mood or idea of the piece.

**Solving the Bigger Problem**

During one of my residencies, I taught students Scratch, a program used to make computer games. Scratch uses visual “pieces” of code that come in a variety of shapes and colors, like building blocks that “fit” together to program the game. Naturally, many questions arose when students attempted to make their own games. Answering their questions directly would defeat the larger goal, which was to understand the steps of computer programming.

“Programming involves the creation of external representations of your problem-solving processes; programming provides you with opportunities to reflect on your own thinking, even to think about thinking itself” (Resnick et al, 2009). Learning to program helps students think about cause and effect, to pick apart the layers until they find the underlying problem that needs to be fixed. Answering why something did not work would undermine the larger goal of learning programming logic.

For example, a student wanted to know why their in-game character was not facing left when the left arrow key on the keyboard was pressed. Instead of telling them which piece of code they needed to use (i.e. “Look here, now drag this code block there”) to solve their problem, I would ask them what they wanted a certain keypress to accomplish. Next, I had them explain to me what piece of code was doing. They would soon extrapolate what step was missing from their code. Teaching them this procedural thinking made you with opportunities to reflect on your own thinking, even to think about thinking itself” (Resnick et al, 2009). Learning to program helps students think about cause and effect, to pick apart the layers until they find the underlying problem that needs to be fixed. Answering why something did not work would undermine the larger goal of learning programming logic.

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the product. At the end of the day, it did not matter if that little video game character was facing left while moving left, what mattered was that the student could figure out how to achieve the desired outcome.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates elaborates on problem solving further, “more than ever, an education that emphasizes general problem-solving skills will be important. In a changing world, education is the best preparation for being able to adapt. As the economy shifts, people and societies who are appropriately educated will tend to do best” (Gates, 1995). In another case, a student wanted to edit an in-game graphic, known as a “sprite,” using Scratch’s built-in image editor. While it would have taken seconds to point to the particular icon to activate the necessary tool, instead I asked the student to explain what they thought each tool did, based on the icon that adorned it. While this method took longer than just pointing out what they needed to know, it helped the student infer what each icon meant, and in turn what each tool could help them accomplish. “Teachers need to allow students the freedom to experiment with software and when something does not work, try something else” (Black & Browning, 2011). Again, process trumps product.

**Pop Culture Used for Learning**

One project in my final year of TEAM was to teach students the art of sequential storytelling. Students were instructed to make comic books using a program called Comic Life. While we are told to never judge a book by its cover, that is exactly what readers do with comic books. If the cover is worthy, they pick it up, look at it, and hopefully buy it. If they don’t find the cover engaging, the book languishes on the shelf.

Viewing and discussing famous comic book covers became a powerful way to teach design principles to students in TEAM. “Increasingly, educators are recognizing that linking content area teaching to youth culture...is a compelling way to capture and hold students’ attention, make learning relevant, and increase students’ ownership of the learning” (Kingsley, 2007)

Using comic books of characters recognizable to students—such as Spider-Man, Batman, Teen Titans or Captain America—a discussion was held to identify if the scene depicted on the cover was literal or figurative. Students were also asked to identify the key elements that made a certain cover effective, and what they thought the story inside was about. This would guide their own choices when they created a cover for their own books. This lesson resonated with the students. Some took a more literal approach when designing their comic book covers, i.e. a group of young heroes looking tough, and that is fine. Such an approach has worked with titles like X-Men for decades. Other students went with figurative ideas for their comic covers. Some strong examples include American and Confederate flags colliding, a burning harlequin mask, and an antiquated record player with the ominous title, *The Last Dance*. All of these interesting ideas demonstrated that the students could not only tell their story, but sell it too.

**Teaching the Teacher**

As much as I’d like to say otherwise, I don’t know everything. This is especially true with software that is as new to me as it is to the students. “Teachers do not have to know everything about the software; they need only be willing to take a creative approach to technology and learn from their students” (Black & Browning, 2011). Indeed, I do not know every detail of every program that I teach. This was especially true when I taught Comic Life, which had a plethora of layout choices and text settings.

Of course, there were questions I could not readily answer. Even at the college level, this happens. My strategy is to challenge the student to find the answer and then report what they had found, creating a partnership with the student. “[T]his requires a shift in teaching strategies—from telling to asking, for sole authority over the classroom to that of a co-learner in the classroom. It requires an approach that I have previously called reciprocal teaching...” (Delacruz, 2009).

In my first five years or so as a college teacher, I would worry when I could not answer a student’s question. I always felt the need to try and figure out the answer—especially in technical matters—in order to “save face” in front of the students. We all want to feel that we are the expert in the room, and not that we can easily answer any question thrown our way. This is unrealistic.

While I eventually learned to turn the question back on the student, I will freely state that this process became much more a part of my style when teaching grammar school students. There is a world of difference between teaching a three-hour class with 15 college freshmen and an hour-long class with 30 seventh graders. As a teacher, you can only spend so much time trying to figure something out, lest you spend the entire session trying to answer one student’s query. I would make my best attempt to point the student in the right direction, and ask them to let me know when content was found.

Having the student then demonstrate to me how they accomplished the task served two purposes. First, it taught me the information that I did not know so that I could help...
I grew up as an undisadvantaged student. I rarely turned in homework and I had a hard time paying attention in class. Students who have difficulty in the typical school environment have a tendency to take on the role of the “bad” student, either given to them by others or by themselves. This role becomes internalized and students lose their confidence in their actual versus their perceived academic abilities. One could argue that confidence is the most important non-cognitive skill because it is necessary in order to utilize all other skills. Confidence also breeds empowerment and engagement. Not only did I experience this gain in confidence through my own arts-integrated curriculum as a student, but I also observed the same pattern in my students as their teaching artist. This increase in confidence, both academic and social, is what makes arts integration so special.

“Persistence, patience, practice, working in an ensemble, empathy, and learning to tolerate criticism are all habits learned in the study of the arts.” (Nathan, 2012)

As a student, my struggles to keep up in class were amplified in larger projects, like book reports. I always read for fun, so reading and comprehending the assigned book was never an issue for me. My problem was the form in which I was assessed on my comprehension. That is, until I had my first video assignment. Our seventh grade English teacher said we had the choice between our usual written book report or making a video. At the time, I felt as though our teacher was pretty foolish for letting us get out of doing actual homework. I had no problem taking advantage of this perceived foolishness. My Friend Lina and I teamed up to create an episode of The Late Late Show based on the characters in the book, The Pearl by John Steinbeck. The video was a goofy piece and our disagreement of the characters’ actions came across loud and clear.

Most importantly, our understanding of the book’s content was obvious. Our teacher gave us the video option several more times. Each time I took the assignment with enthusiasm, and each subsequent video was more successful. Prior to the video assignments, my classmates knew that having me in their group meant that they would have to compensate for my lack of participation. Eventually, the other kids requested to be in my group and I would even take on a leadership role as director. This changed the way I saw myself. I imagine there was a change in my grade for that class but I do not remember it. What I do remember, is that I finally felt smart and competent in some small way and from then on, when people asked about my best subject, I would answer, “Definitely English.”

In high school, I took as many art classes as possible, which led to further successes. This did not completely turn my academic career around, but knowing that I had skill in some areas inspired me to try harder. The more I tried, the more I succeeded and the more accomplishments I attained, the more confidence I had in subsequent assignments. It was a cycle of success, and if I had had more art-integration in my non-arts classes, I would have done much better in those classes. Going to college was not a given for me, taking into account my past difficulties. In the end, a considerable motivating factor to attend college was that I knew that as a film major I would enjoy most of my classes and I had always excelled when I liked what I was learning. What I did not realize at the time was that it was actually how I was learning, versus what I was learning, that created favorable outcomes for me. Project-based learning was the root of all my success because I was actively doing what I was learning in the classroom.

The irony is not lost on me that someone who could not wait to get out of school would then enthusiastically choose to work in schools. I do think that my own education background, both the good and bad experiences, are what helps me connect with my non-traditional students just as much as I do with the smart, diligent ones. Instead of thinking, “How do I relate and get through to this student,” I always think, “How did my teachers get through to me and how did they love me?” I still see myself as that same unconventional student, only I no longer call myself a “bad” student, and it has lost that paralyzing hold on me.

During my five years as a part of TEAM, I worked in wildly different neighborhoods throughout Chicago. I have had 15 different residences as a teaching artist in video, photography, stop-motion animation, infographics and comics. I have never had the same teacher twice. I have learned a great deal and have become inspired by some amazing co-teachers. It fills my heart with joy when I think about the sweet and energetic kids I have taught. I hope I have influenced them as much as some of my teachers did me.

One student whose confidence seemed particularly affected by his two years of TEAM was Gerald. We worked together during his first year with TEAM and at the beginning of that video residency, Gerald was a neutral student. This is only significant because every day before class, I would hear about another incident from Gerald’s regular classroom teachers. He would tell us in teachers’ meetings, call them names and even throw desks. I saw none of this behavior in our work together. Oftentimes, students who have academic and behavioral issues in other classes excel under my programs.

Gerald gradually started raising his hand more and more to answer questions, make useful observations or volunteer first for classroom activities. He would get a satisfied half smile whenever he was acknowledged for his