

9-19-14 The Art of Public Health

Twenty seven years ago I approached the principal of Dennett Elementary School to discuss the possibility of an art appreciation program presented by trained volunteers. It would be called The Docent Art Program and we would present thematic units of mounted fine art reproductions for classroom discussions. The principal was in favor of the idea and gave me the go ahead to recruit and train some volunteers and pursue funding for the prints. The Local Cultural Council (At the time it was the Arts Lottery.) funded two groups of prints. A month later with a handful of volunteers, we were ready to talk about art with children for two months that autumn of so long ago.

The model for the program began with the Great Books discussions my oldest son had enjoyed so much, back when there was funding for that wonderful program. Open-ended questions are asked of the students to allow them the opportunity to think, on their own, and to express themselves. It was a good beginning. The Docent Art Program was for everyone, though, not a minority of students selected by their teachers for being “bright”. The Docent Art Program assumes all children are bright and have something to offer.

The assumption that every child is worth listening to is just one of the many guiding principles of the program. Those principles guide the volunteers so that they have the most creative discussions and yet, stay on track, focusing on the art work. A docent is a volunteer trained to teach. They don’t present the art works with a memorized speech and they don’t tell the students how they should feel about the art or what opinions they can or cannot have. The docents learn from the students. The art elicits the responses.

As the program was tweaked, we learned some ways of improving it. For instance, those first two units had four prints each, presented over forty five minutes, more or less. That was too many prints. When I received the good news that the teachers all loved the program and wanted it to continue, I knew that I would use three prints. Three focal points have a nice beginning, middle and end feeling, as in a story.

We have been learning from children ever since. A kindergarten girl told me, when she saw Ghirlandaio’s *Old Man and His Grandson* from 1490, that she knew they loved each other by the looks on their faces and that the painting made her think about all the grandfathers in the whole world.

A second grade girl told the docent, when she looked at a *Self Portrait* by Van Gogh that he was sad and she thought it was because he could not find someone to marry. The girl intuited a fact about Van Gogh!

We have had the opportunity to witness true “Ah ha!” moments in the lives of the students, like the time we were discussing with fifth graders, three paintings by women artists and they were wondering why it seemed all, or most of, the famous artists were men. The idea that men are more talented was offered and discussed, because the program is science-based. By that, I mean that we start with the null hypothesis and consider any and all possibilities, and then

we see what the evidence indicates. Eventually, after a lengthy discussion, we arrived at a point where it seemed there must be talented women artists but perhaps there were reasons why we did not know about them. I asked if anyone could think of a reason why art works by women were not in the big shows or museums. A boy's face just lit up as he raised his hand and could not contain himself. "I think I know why! I think maybe they were not allowed to enter." When I asked him what made him consider this, he said, "I learned that in Black History month. Black people were not allowed in certain schools and their paintings were not allowed in the shows or museums." That boy had taken a concept that had been residing in the "Black History box" in his mind and then he allowed it to come out of that box and be applied to other situations. He looked very pleased with himself and for good reason; he had truly discovered something!

While these classroom discussions take place, the children are also learning to listen to the opinions of others, to respect the fact that everyone has the right to their own feelings and opinions. They learn to consider other views and they sometimes change their opinions, as the evidence grows.

We look at art, we think like scientists and we conduct ourselves in a civil manner. We learn about art along the way, as we discover focal points, composition, use of color and many styles. Really and truly, though, it is a health promotion program.

Halifax Elementary has at least one volunteer for every classroom! (They sometimes have to share, as so many sign up to be docents.) Plympton's Dennett Elementary School is in need of volunteers. Please spread the word. Neighbors, aunts, uncles and grandparents are welcome!

We meet only seven times a year and we have a blast! Please call me at 508 746 8506 or email me at halifaxboh@hotmail.com for more information.

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