

Educational Leadership

May 2007 | Volume 64 | Number 8

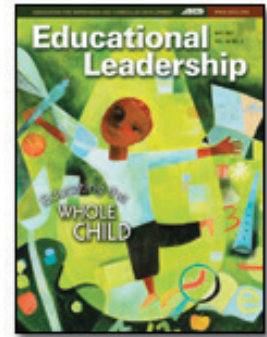
Educating the Whole Child Pages 50-51

Teaching Content Through the Arts

Kids as Curators

Linda D'Acquisto

During the past two months, 6th graders in Pat Morrissey's classroom at Elmwood Elementary School in New Berlin, Wisconsin, accomplished a challenging task: They created a school museum about environmental issues to share with their community. This process engaged their intellects, piqued their interest, and developed their communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. At the same time, students learned important content to meet rigorous state standards.



May 2007

Before students began their work, project planners (either teachers alone or teachers and students) developed a "big idea" for the upcoming exhibition. In a single sentence, they clarified what they wanted visitors (and students) to remember long after the event. The big idea for the Elmwood environment museum was *Humans can hurt or help the environment*.

After establishing the big idea, planners developed a set of topics and focus questions. Students formed exhibit teams of about six students each, and each group studied one focus question. One team investigated the question, How do human decisions affect the water quality of Lake Michigan? Other teams studied such topics as biodiversity, waste disposal systems, recycling, pollution, global warming, and energy conservation.

Each exhibit team then worked with an adult facilitator to develop research questions that it would investigate within its topic area. The exhibit team studying Lake Michigan water quality had many questions: Are there limits to the amount of dumping that can occur from factories and industry? Why do factories and industry continue to pollute when they know it's harmful? What could be done to stop dumping? Is water pollution in Lake Michigan getting better or worse? Can the community afford to keep Lake Michigan clean? What will happen if Lake Michigan isn't kept clean? By the end of the brainstorming session, the students were eager to begin their research.

With the help of their library-media specialist, local and distant museum professionals, and community organizations, Elmwood students collected and analyzed print material, Internet information, objects, and images to answer their research questions. They also interviewed community members and professionals by e-mail and telephone and conducted research at a local science center. The Lake Michigan exhibit team requested information from the Milwaukee

Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) and received a poster of the ecosystems in the Midwest, a map of Lake Michigan drainage, and a booklet titled *Lake Michigan Drainage: State of the Watershed*. Their museum research led students to another idea—involving Elmwood Elementary in the MMSD's water conservation program, Every Drop Counts. The MMSD delivered a rain barrel and rain gauge to the students and taught them how to collect and analyze rain water. The 6th graders presented this information to 4th graders, who plan to maintain the water barrels as part of their science program, collaborating with kindergarten students who will use the water to grow a vegetable garden.

When research was complete and all questions answered, the students wrote up their research findings, studied them, and created a list of learning goals for visitors to their exhibit. Students' research write-up and list of learning goals also helped teachers evaluate how well the students understood the topic that their display would address.

When students fully understood their exhibit topic and had clarified what they wanted their visitors to learn, they turned their attention to presentation methods. What better place to learn effective exhibit design strategies than a museum? Students visited a local museum to look for clues about what makes an exhibit interesting, engaging, informative, well-organized, and creative. They also used the district distance education laboratory to experience an interactive, live tour with staff in a museum two states away.

Keeping their research findings and their new knowledge of effective display techniques in mind, students selected objects and images to tell the story of their exhibit's theme. Their displays included artifacts, models, interactive devices, video presentations, pictures, photographs, time lines, diagrams, charts, and maps. For example, the Lake Michigan exhibit team displayed a map of the St. Lawrence Seaway showing the travel routes of ships, a model of the seaway, some of the pollutants, and invasive species that have found their way to Lake Michigan in the ballast water of ships traveling this route. Students also created text panels to explain the objects in the display, which gave them practice in writing for a specific audience (museum visitors) and for specific purposes (to interpret their objects, explain the important content in their display, and provoke interest in their topic).

When the exhibition was installed, students prepared to be museum docents. They examined their completed exhibit, reviewed its key points, and selected "hooks"—interesting questions, activities, or objects—to capture their visitors' attention. Students used their completed displays to teach classmates about their topic—which not only prepared them to interact with museum visitors, but also ensured that all student teams learned the content of the full exhibition.

Elmwood students sent opening-night invitations to all families and wrote a press release for the New Berlin newspaper. Personal invitations were sent to community collaborators—volunteers, university professors, and environmental professionals—and most of them attended. The evening opening was a single event, but student docents spent the next several days leading school groups through their classroom and hallway exhibition.

You might think that after such a rigorous project students would be ready for a break. But

when Ms. Morrissey asked her class what they would like to do for the upcoming Elmwood Elementary Celebration of Learning—an evening open house at the end of each school year—students unanimously exclaimed, “Let's create another museum!”

Linda D'Acquisto is an educational consultant offering professional development, consulting, and coaching for school museum projects; ldacquisto@msn.com; www.kidcurators.com. She is the author of *Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums that Build Understanding* (ASCD, 2006).

Copyright © 2007 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2007 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development