

FIELDWORK

NOTES FROM EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

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A CHILDREN'S OPERA WITH A CALLING: AN EXPEDITION EVOLVES INTO A MISSION ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

BY JOHARI VOS

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Education teaches us what it means to be human; the arts teach us how it feels to be human.

—Sally W. Bryan, 1962

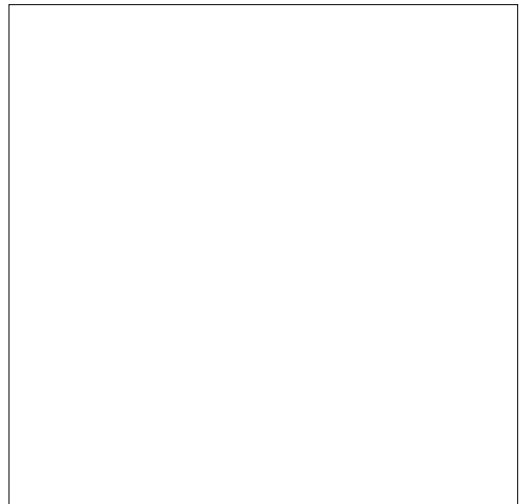
the author's high school language arts teacher

June 21, 1999: Am I crazy? Opera? With third- and fourth-graders? Cathy Taggett, our visual arts teacher, and I boarded a red-eye from Seattle for training in Cincinnati with the New York Metropolitan Opera Guild's Education Department. I was about to immerse myself into a week's work with opera singers, music teachers, and other talented souls, learning the art of facilitating children's creation of original opera. It could be a great expedition . . . or I could be in way over my head.

Late September 2000: Children handed in their carefully crafted applications for jobs in the production company. The culture of "Opera!" had taken hold at Alternative Elementary II, a K-5 school in Seattle, as never before. With help from Cathy, guest artist Terri Richter, and several parents, my class had had a rousing success the previous spring with a child-created opera called *The Hike*, and this year's classes felt self-imposed pressure to do as

well. In the summer of 2000 I had taken Level 2 Met training, and Steve Chavez, the other third- and fourth-grade teacher, had been to Level 1 training. With a strong belief in the in-

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Third and fourth graders from Alternative Elementary II in Seattle, Washington created this logo for their Fantastic World of Opera Production Company during an expedition on Opera. Student members of the P.R. department for the company include Colleen Brennan, Savannah Dewolf, Chris Lee, Penny Mills, and Torie Reed.

EDITOR

Amy Mednick

LAYOUT AND PRODUCTION

Kathryn Keith Runyan

TEMPLATE DESIGN

Carroll Conquest,
Conquest Design

Fieldwork welcomes articles, reviews, journal entries, and samples of student work. Please submit entries to amednick@rochester.rr.com.

Expeditionary Learning
Outward Bound
National Office
100 Mystery Point Road
Garrison, NY 10524
1-914-424-4000

www.elob.org

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Children's Opera, continued from page 1

fusion of the arts into all learning, we had decided to form one production company with both of our classes.

We used the Metropolitan Opera Guild's Creating Original Opera model as the core of our expedition, but we wanted to integrate as many district requirements as possible into our opera studies. Our primary guiding question was, "What do we need to know, or know how to do, to produce good opera?" and students soon discovered that many of their general school requirements would be useful for doing well on this project. We fulfilled requirements for social studies

and literacy, and our own goals to teach comprehension strategies, by studying children's books of operas and other theater pieces. Through script writing and reflections we satisfied narrative and expository writing requirements, and through letter writing, we taught necessary elements of persuasive writing.

Mandated science units on electricity and food chemistry were worked in, as well as some math. At our school, as long as we work in the skills and concepts children are expected to learn, we are flexible in being able to plan pretty inclusive, and thus powerful, expeditions. Because the Creating Original Opera (COO) model closely follows a real-life production company, not everyone learns everything equally. The company creates specialists, or "experts." While this was excellent for our students' sense of collaboration to accomplish the job, Steve and I modified the COO model and built in group opportunities for learning curriculum required by the district.

The COO model uses many of the tenets on which Expeditionary Learning is based, such as valuing real work/application, diversity, self-discovery, responsibility, original work/research, audience, collaboration, and multiple

drafts. Our production company format meant all children had jobs, and every job was essential to the success of the production—from carpenter to writer to performer. Every job required an "audition," or application process, with "best work" quality drafts (see chart on page 7).

As the "Directors" of the company, Steve and I had to assign jobs. Each student had to select and do the application work for three different jobs, but we knew some really had their hearts set on certain ones. Still, only 10 of 52 children would be performers. We needed a balanced company, one that would be most likely to flourish and succeed. For each job department

A great deal of joy of life consists in doing perfectly, or at least to the best of one's ability, everything which one attempts to do. There is pride in surveying such a work—a work which is indeed, full, exact, complete with all its parts—which superficial people, who leave their work in a slovenly, slipshod half-finished condition, can never know. It is this conscientious completeness which turns work into art. The smallest thing well done, is artistic.

—William Matthews
Poet

we wanted small, diverse groups of children who would work well together. We mixed ethnicity, boys and girls, older and younger, literate and less so, special needs children, and not. For each job we needed to have students whom we could count on to work independently, as well as those who "needed" the experience to build their self-esteem. We honored AEII's 26-year history of balancing the social and emotional and intellectual needs of each child. We mostly looked for enthusiasm, noting that set designers needed good ideas more than drawing ability and performers would be trainable. Still, it took us two weeks to make all of our decisions. We announced jobs with great flourish and handed out personal letters to each child "from the company" at our second "company meeting," and only had a few tears. Once the students got into their work, they all

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SNAPSHOTS FROM AN ATELIERISTA

BY ANNE THULSON

We teach art at Odyssey Charter School in Denver, Colorado within learning expeditions to help children experience their expeditions and adventures in visual and poetic ways. Using this approach, we are still able to address basic art education practices and standards: making quality studio art; studying art history; and thinking critically and interpretively about the meaning of art.

THINK VISUALLY

Students study real things by drawing, painting, and sculpting from life. First and second graders studying bugs draw and sculpt from real bugs and add color true to their models. Kindergartners make a memory collage of their rock climbing experience with paint and string. Students

take classroom academics and investigate those same subjects with a different part of their brain through art. First and second graders experience bugs through pencil, watercolor and clay. Kindergartners experience rock climbing through color, cutting, and taping.

MAKE EXPEDITIONS BEAUTIFUL

Students create quality displays of their expedition knowledge through handmade books, display boards, masks, puppets, etc. Our middle

school expedition is on “Need and Greed” which focuses on economics and ethics. Students investigated the ethics of art auctions and the monetary value of art through a mock auction of their own. They also looked at

the sculpture of artists Joseph Cornell and Betye Saar, and created small sculptures that express their own needs as adolescents. Students approach the subjects of supply and demand and human needs by making imagery and thinking metaphorically. They also learn some art history and sculpture techniques in the process. Third and fourth graders design detailed, colored maps that demonstrate their knowledge of city planning. They learn about the aesthetics of mapmaking and colored pencil technique.

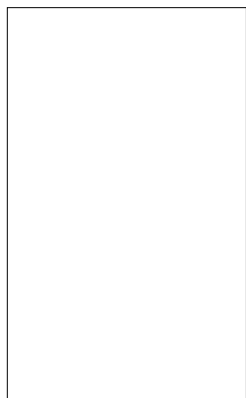
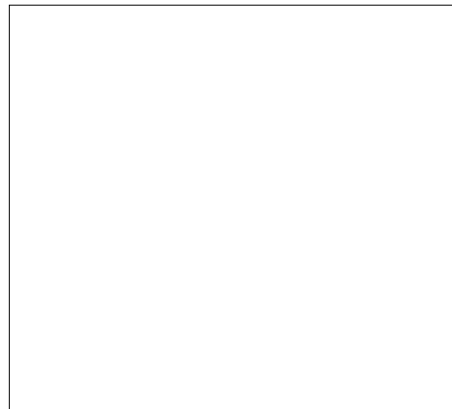
THINK AND SPEAK INTERPRETIVELY ABOUT ART

Students practice talking about art in peer critiques and art-slide talks that mirror the critiques and Socratic seminars they do in their classrooms. Studying the Negro Baseball Leagues, fifth and sixth graders analyze the contrasting depictions of African Americans in

Henry Oswald Tanner’s paintings and in vaudville illustrations. Using a rubric inspired by the Aaron Douglas paintings they studied, these students critique variety, unity, and color tints in each other’s paintings. The students learn to think more deeply and say more about art than “I like it, I don’t like it.”

Anne Thulson is atelierista at Odyssey Charter School. Her position as art teacher is modeled after the approach to teaching art in the early childhood schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. For more on Thulson’s role at Odyssey, refer to her piece in The Web in November 2000.

These observations of butterflies are from the first- and second-grade expedition “Bugs” at the Odyssey School in Denver, Colorado. Artists include Pearl Pielsticker, bottom left; Jack Hernandez, center; and Annie Want, above.



The best way to describe an Expeditionary Learning atelierista is that he or she is the visual voice for the school. This voice helps tell the story of each expedition.

—Anne Thulson

The Web, November 2000

Dresden in Memoriam:

AN EXPEDITION FOR CONCERT BAND

BY JEFF LONG

Selecting appropriate music is important to a young musician's development. It should be high quality, challenging (but not so much that quality is compromised), and enjoyable to work on and perform. In selecting literature now, I am drawn to pieces that relate to history, or tell a story with music. Since Ronan High School began working with Expeditionary Learning, I have also started to ask myself if the composition might complement one of our class expeditions.

In the fall of 2000, our freshman expedition for the first part of the year was World War II. Early in the planning stages, a composition came to mind: *Dresden in Memoriam* by Mon-

hand the dramatic effect this unusual piece had on an audience. This seemed like a perfect way to connect with the other departments on this expedition. What I did not realize was that learning this piece would become an expedition of its own for our band students.

To introduce this composition, on the first day I passed out the fourth movement. This section is written in non-traditional notation. The unusual notations immediately engaged the students' curiosity. They asked many questions: "What is this squiggly thing?" and "We're really going to play this?" and "How do we do this?"

Playing a recording of the composition was the only "hook" needed. The fourth movement is emotionally intense. It has a long, dramatic crescendo of sounds of bombers, explosions, and voices whispering, then shouting in German, and finally coming to a five second period of chaos, which gives way to a gentle major chord in the lower instruments. This fades to the sound of a single flute imitating a woman or a young child crying. I got goosebumps every time I heard or performed this section. After hearing the recording, a student said: "Mr. Long, if we play this, the audience will cry."

In the next rehearsal, we passed out the rest of the piece and began practicing it from the beginning. Progress was slow at first due to the technical demands. To address the difficulty of the composition, we had to come up with a strategy for evaluating our progress. So, on about the fourth rehearsal of this unit, the

tana composer Dan Bukvich. As a junior majoring in Music Education at the University of Idaho, I had performed this piece with the Wind Ensemble. This composition is about the tragic bombing of Dresden, Germany by allied forces during WWII. As a trumpet player in the first band to perform this piece, I had seen first-

This piece is absolutely bone chilling. It sends chills down your spine, robbing you of courage. This piece is full of emotion and action. I have never seen a piece that spoke so much. When we performed this piece, I took notice of the audience. The audience was crying, some were full of rage and wonder of how people could just silence a city with no reason or logical thought. I also had mixed feelings of sorrow and rage.

—Savannah Winchester

Sophomore, at Ronan High School in Ronan, Montana, describes
Dresden in Memoriam

band students and I together created a rubric that was to guide us as we prepared the Dresden piece. Band directors usually get nervous about using class time for anything other than practice, but in this case, developing this rubric actually saved us time in the long run.

Interestingly, the criteria for excellence listed by the band were very much in line with what I had in mind. As we worked out the notes and rhythms, we referred to this rubric to assess individual improvement and the development of the ensemble. In section practice sessions, we worked on challenging phrases in small groups. A student leader would run the sectional and be responsible for covering the assigned parts. This method helped us develop student leadership and was a way to focus on many different details of a song at the same time so that students would spend less time sitting.

On days when we had sectionals, I would supervise the youngest section or the section with hardest parts. Before practicing in sectionals, we discussed, modeled, and practiced ways students could help each other improve using peer critique. For example, a constructive criticism needed to be preceded by a compliment or a positive observation. Then we would record ourselves individually and as an ensemble use the rubric to critique our progress. Listening to themselves was a great reality check, and the recording of the University of Idaho Wind Ensemble served as an exemplary musical model.

RECRUITING AN OUTSIDE EXPERT

Before we started the rehearsal process, I attended the Montana Music Educators State Conference. Dan Bukvich, who is a Montana composer, was giving a presentation at the conference because the all-state band was premiering his new composition *Buffalo Jump Ritual*. I told him of our expedition, and invited him to our school to work with our band. He not only agreed, but also brought three other outstanding music educators from the University of Idaho. Knowing that the

This piece was written differently than most other music. Instead of using notes, he uses pictures and symbols. Each symbol represents an emotion. For example, this picture symbolizes the smoke left behind from the bombs. This symbol was played by letting air move through your instrument. There is no sound, just silence. This timing is different too. Instead of counting in 4/4 time which is just 1-2-3-4, each section is played in 10 second sections. This all takes place in the fourth movement. This is the part of the song that makes you realize the horror and destruction of that day. Even listening to this movement for the hundredth time, it still sends chills down my spine. The ending of the song is what gets you the most. There is a flute solo. The note is so low that you can hardly tell that someone is playing it. This reminds me of someone crying. It is moving and brings tears to anyone's eyes.

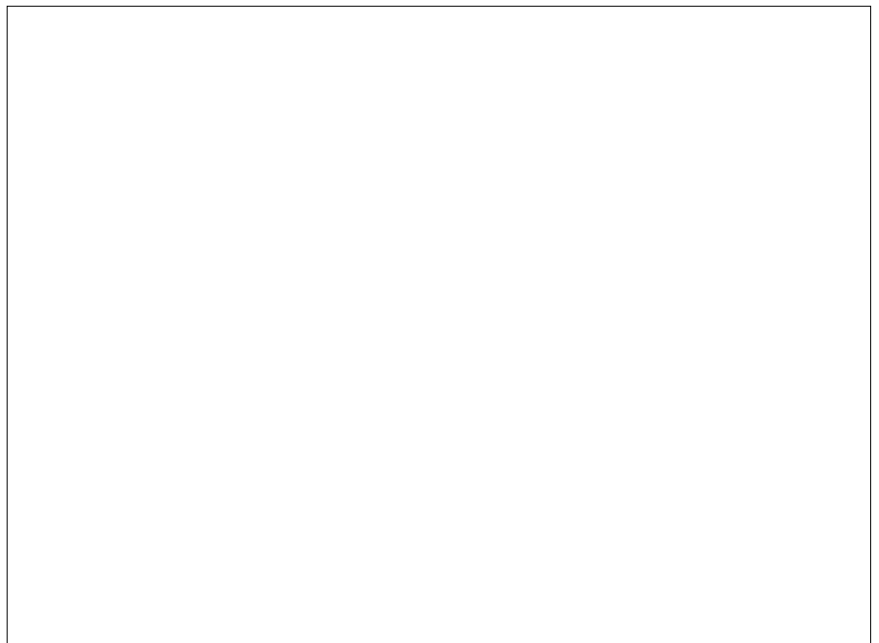
—Rosalynn Mathern, Junior

composer of a piece of music that we were working on was coming to our school was very exciting for us, if not a little scary.

In the workshop, Mr. Bukvich helped identify specific technical areas that we needed to improve. We were having timing and tempo problems. Mr. Bukvich had the students do some counting and clapping exercises working on subdividing the beat without speeding up or slowing down. After the students gained some mastery with this activity, they applied this technique to two pieces of music,

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Below is a section of the fourth movement of *Dresden in Memoriam* by Dan Bukvich, which was performed by students in the Ronan High School Band in Ronan, Montana.



Dresden in Memoriam, continued from page 5

Dresden in Memoriam and *Rites of Tamburo* by Robert W. Smith.

The invited musicians had very high standards. The band was forced to take responsibility for their parts and not depend on the conductor for counting and tempo. The results were dramatic. We discovered that the band improved both its rhythmic performance and its overall tone quality. This seemed to be a result of the focused listening and thinking required in the work on subdivisions.

As part of our session, Mr. Bukvich also told the band about some of the background of the piece. He originally wrote *Dresden*, which is now played by bands and orchestras all over the world, for his Master's Thesis. The piece had been forgotten, but was recovered by the University of Idaho Wind Ensemble in 1978.

Because of Ronan's isolated location (south of Glacier National Park and 50 miles north of Missoula on the Flathead Indian Reservation), the opportunity to interact with profes-

sional musicians was inspirational and educational. Musicians Gary Gemberling, Alan Gemberling, and Bob Miller played their instruments for and with our band, providing outstanding models for tone production and musicality. The musicians' enthusiasm and knowledge rubbed off on our students and affected our rehearsals for the rest of the year. Many times we returned to the counting/subdivision/clapping exercises that Mr. Bukvich introduced. Students were less tolerant of mental errors in class. Often I would

When we played at our concert everyone was quiet and we even made some people cry. Just sitting and playing gave me the chills. I don't know how other people in our band felt, but I really liked the piece and thought that by studying WWII it helped me get the feeling of the piece.

—Stacy Harris, Sophomore

get comments like: "Mr. Long, that wasn't very good, can we try it again?"

CULMINATING EVENT

Our gym became a walk-through exhibit of student work from almost all of our freshman classes. Representing the arts was a United Service Organization (USO) show presented by the Choir students and an art exhibit featuring student drawings of local war heroes. Our band performance began with a reading done by a freshman clarinet player. "On the night of February 13th, 1945, allied forces firebombed the undefended German city of Dresden. The city was swollen, by the flow of refugees fleeing the advancing Russian army, to almost twice its normal population. The "firestorm" killed approximately 150,000 men, women, and children."

From the first note of our performance, it was obvious to everyone in the room that this would be something special. The maturity and poise displayed by our students far exceeded my expectations. We were not technically perfect, but we moved the audience by conveying the necessary emotion and attitude. Performing in a culminating event involving the entire freshman class was unique for us because it allowed us to reach students and community members that might not usually attend our regular concerts. After the last note of the flute solo faded away, the audience was silent for a long moment, and then gave us a standing ovation that I think our students will always remember. ✨

Jeff Long is the band director at Ronan High School in Ronan, Montana.

SUGGESTED BAND LITERATURE FOR EXPEDITIONS

~ *JFK in Memoriam* by James Curnow (The 60s)

~ *Everest Top of the World* by Elliot Del Borgo

~ *Trail of Tears* by James Barnes (Native American History)

~ *Legend of the Ghost Dance* by Paul Jennings (Native American History)

~ *Dinosaurs* by Dan Bukvich

~ *The Light Eternal* by James Swearingen (WWII)

~ *Mambo #5* (instrumental version) by Perez Prado (Spanish/Latin dance)

~ *Oye Como Va* by Tito Puente (Spanish/Latin dance)

~ *The Mighty Nile* by James Curnow

Children's Opera, continued from page 2

began to take ownership of their particular jobs and of their contributions to the company.

We averaged only about an hour per day directly on the expedition during the first two months, but some other activities were indirectly related. For example, since our school has no established music program, Steve and I decided to hire an outside artist to teach vocal music twice a week to all of our students during the fall months. Between October and February the writers did their work, others gradually began, and by March, the entire company was fully involved in expedition activities nearly all hours of every week. Time-slots were reserved for math and physical education.

We prefaced department specialization with all-class instruction in order to integrate other subject matter into the expedition. A team of four students wrote the opera, however we taught script writing to all of our students.

Writing a script requires detailed development of the characters, and to do this we also taught a mini-course in the psychology of motivation. We taught them how to use conflict, theme and thesis development to drive the plot. We set up opportunities for students to interview community professionals related to their jobs; written reports based on the interviews fulfilled non-fiction writing objectives.

While the entire class learned a bit of music theory and notation from the fall vocal music sessions, the composer team experimented with sound for hours with Steve and Bob Kechley, a professional musician and composer also hired with our grant funding. We read children's books of operas and studied them for story content, op-

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THE COMPANY MODEL

Each student's job in the opera production was as important as the next. Below are some examples of the job descriptions and samples of application requirements. All applicants had to include a short piece on why they thought they would be good at each job for which they applied.

Children's Opera, continued from page 7

era structure, appropriateness for stage, and reading comprehension. We read some as readers' theater, and acted out short scenes of others to learn voice projection. We studied several operas in depth, attending Seattle Opera's fall production of Lucia di Lammermoor. Children regularly wrote reflections about these operas, including one after Lucia focusing specifically on evidence of how their department job was carried out. All of these active theater experiences also fit district standards for listening and oral communication.

Similarly, our lighting designer/electricians would need to have a thorough understanding of electricity in order to build footlights and dimmer boards from scratch. All of our students studied electricity, doing various experiments with batteries, wires, and light bulbs. But the electricians went on to learn about the power and mathematical ratios of wall current. While the electricity unit comes directly from our district fourth-grade curriculum, we modified and connected the lessons to fit the expedition. Everyone learned more about measurement than the math curriculum might dictate, and carpenters and costume designers used what they learned in their jobs.

In order to have everyone "buy in" to the time-consuming opera, the entire company participated in choosing the theme and thesis of the work. The group brainstormed a long list of topics, such as family, environmental issues, world peace, friendship, pets, endangered animals, abuse, Orca whales, the homeless, and children's rights. Eventually, after great deliberation, they chose "Friends" as their theme. A similar process led to the thesis that "sometimes friends include you, and sometimes they don't." Inclusivity! Right up there in the Expeditionary Learning Design Principles, and certainly something always on every child's agenda. A line from their opening song became the opera's title:

If I had but two loaves of bread
I would sell one
and buy hyacinths
for they would feed my soul.

-The Koran

Costumes for *Friends, Friends, Fabulous Friends* were designed by Anika Martynowych, a student at Alternative Education II in Seattle, Washington.

NO WAY. THE HUNDRED IS THERE.

The child is made of one hundred.

The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.

The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.

The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.

They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.

They tell the child:
to discover the world already there and of the
hundred they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.

The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

—Loris Malaguzzi

translated by Lella Gandini

“Friends, Friends, Fabulous Friends!”

The writers spent weeks developing 10 diverse characters and diagrammed potential conflicts and alliances based on these characters’ traits. The team finally decided to express the agreed-upon thesis, about friends including and excluding each other, through a plot in which two teams of children would work on a school debate assignment. At different times various characters would be “excluded,” just as might happen in real life, and squabbles would ensue.

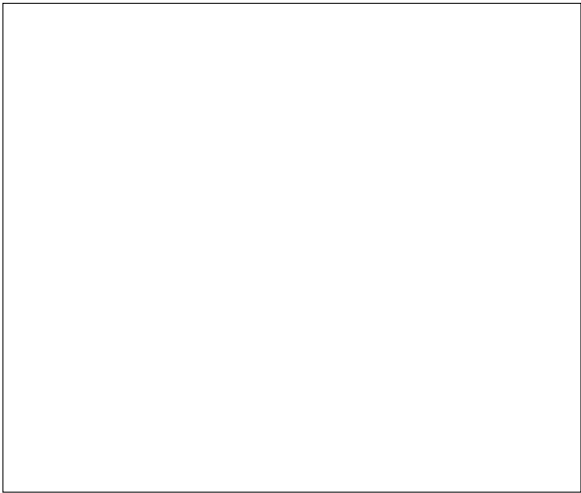
Whenever the writers had completed either a set of traits for a character or the outline of a scene, they would feed this information to the composers who would then create short themes for the characters or mood pieces of “under-scoring” for the scenes. Thus, by the time the writers sent actual lyrics for arias and ensemble pieces to the composers, they had files full of motifs representing characters and melodies expressing mood from which to pull material for their songs. Steve and Bob would listen to the children’s ideas, play various versions back on the piano and then the team would reach consensus on what to keep and how to string their ideas together to fit the lyrics.

During this time, the writers also talked about another subject they were determined to insert into their work: children’s rights. Near the beginning of September, Sherrie Brown, an attorney friend of mine, shared with the class her work helping Cambodian legislators write laws beneficial to children. She also described the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a United Nations treaty signed by all but two countries in the world. The children were shocked and offended that the United States was one of those countries. They chose to incorporate this passion by making the United States’ signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child the subject of their characters’ school debate assignment. They included a subplot about a character who was new to the school and not getting his right to an education because he stayed home frequently to care for a sickly younger sister, who was not getting her

right to medical care.

Their plot worked well, and the rest of the company got caught up in the “mission” of creating an opera with an important message about the neglect of children’s rights here in America. As writers fed completed scenes to the other departments, the motivation for doing

well rose several notches, and helped even the most distractible students focus on high quality work. The writers put in well over 100 hours (some of it after school and on Saturdays) on script writing; set designers and composers gave up recesses. The public relations officers recorded a spot at a radio station after school hours; performers missed classroom “choice time” to work with their singing coach. In the spring we held three Saturday work days and rehearsals for the company—everyone came, and grumbling was nearly non-existent.



This poster, urging the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, was created by third- and fourth-grade students, Nick Drummond and Sam Bender at Alternative Elementary II in Seattle Washington. The idea emerged from their expedition on opera.

RESOURCES

~ www.operaed.org —Information on professional development opportunities at the Metropolitan Opera Guild.

~ www.unicef.org —United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)—Resource on Children’s Rights, including the full text of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as portions rewritten in children’s language.

By production week at the end of March, The Fantastic World of Opera Production Co. had mounted an opera so professional in both content and presentation that parents and visiting dignitaries could hardly believe third- and fourth-graders had accomplished it. After the excitement began to wane, and children began writing final reflections, Steve and I looked forward having our classes join the rest of the

continued on next page

school in a spring expedition on baseball. But, after receiving high praise for the opera's subject matter, our opera company students made it clear that they wanted to take on the mission of the characters they had created. They wanted to further the cause of children's rights.


—*Beverly Sills*

Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA), had attended the opera and was impressed. He agreed to come to school for a company "town meeting" about the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to formally receive the students' carefully drafted letters and position papers. Congressman McDermott sent the letters, with a cover letter, on to President Bush. The students also wrote to Senator Patty Murray (D-WA). The writers of the opera had researched the political issues accurately, so the company understood why the United States had not ratified the Convention. President Clinton had signed it several years ago, but Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) had blocked it in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and so it never reached the full senate.

Our classes had spent several hours wading through and defining the legalese of the entire Convention. Their knowledge was evident in their letters, and in their response to the rather superficial answer they received from a staff member of President Bush. The letter contained some misconceptions about the scope of the Convention, and said, in effect, that the "government knew best." One

child exclaimed, "It's obvious he hasn't even read the Convention!"

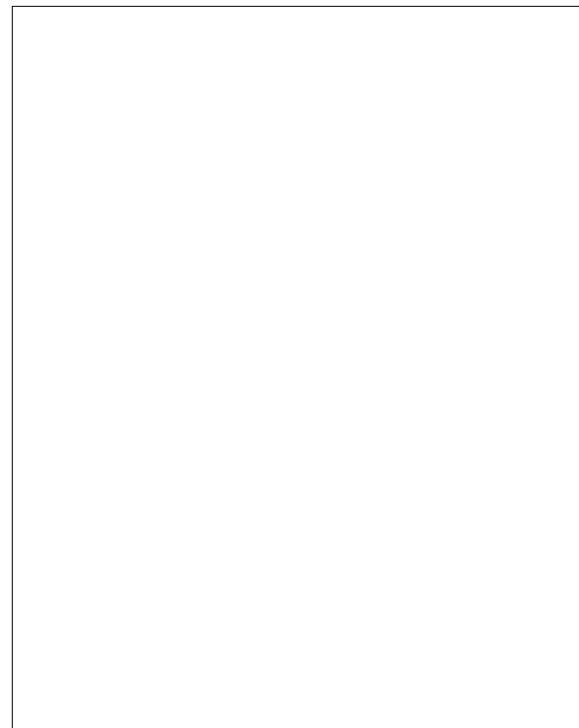
Most of our students were feeling so empowered with the impact they had made on people's increased knowledge of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child that they had little patience for a government representative being patronizing toward them because they were children. They were on a roll. There was talk of taking the opera to Washington D.C, or performing it at a Seattle children's health conference. The D.C. trip was tempting, but too amorphous to plan and accomplish before the end of school in June.

Even this fall, as new expeditions are being undertaken in all of our classes, children around the building still talk about rights in a new way—from the base of knowledge and passion developed last year. The former company members feel a strong bond, and they clearly express a love for opera—for story, theater, and music—that they have carried into their new classes and infused into the lives of other students. At our school, the arts are "cool." Embarrassment and hesitation in vocal music classes have been replaced—yes, even among the boys—with enthusiasm and enjoyment. When conflicts come up between children, I often hear someone refer to an opera character with similar issues, and how the opera characters learned to solve their problems. I truly believe our students did, indeed, learn more about how it "feels" to be human, and I believe it changed them into more empathetic, caring people. 

Johari Vos teaches third and fourth grade at Alternative Elementary II in Seattle, Washington. Vos would like to thank the Nesholm Family Foundation and the Metropolitan Opera Guild Creating Original Opera Program for making the expedition possible. AEII received a grant to fund the artists' salaries from the Nesholm Family Foundation. The Metropolitan Opera Guild Creating Original Opera Program is made possible by the generous support of the GE Fund, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and Vivendi Universal Fund.

You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try.

"Allison's Aria" was written by third-and-fourth-grade team of composers for an expedition on opera at Alternative Elementary II in Seattle, Washington. Lyrics were written by Sara Heermans, Patrick Nicoll, Riley Patterson, and Brenda Seymou, and the music was written by Kathryn Dittamore, Keejaa Ramgotra, and Demarcus Taylor.



DRAWING UNDERSTANDING

BY STEVEN LEVY

The first time I tried to draw a picture on the blackboard with colored chalk, my first graders laughed. They proceeded to draw the scene with much more skill and imagination, and I rejoiced. Despite their discouraging response, I kept drawing. Over the years, I have practiced enough so that my students do not laugh anymore. I even get an occasional “oooh” or “ahhh”! But beyond the beauty of color and form, drawing plays a fundamental role in finding meaning, demonstrating comprehension, and developing character.

The only thing I remember from the one art course I ever took was the teacher’s opening remarks: “Learning to draw is not about technique. It is about learning to see.”

I challenge my students to draw in every subject of the curriculum. On an expedition about shoes, I had everyone find a shoe in their parents’ closet that looked like it had a story to tell. They each wrote a descriptive paragraph about the shoe. The next night I had them draw the shoe. Then they wrote again, with much richer detail and interesting observation, simply from the attention they gave the shoe in the drawing.

DRAWING IN SCIENCE

The same attention developed through drawing equips my students to be more careful observers as scientists. Drawing pictures of scientific processes: the formation of magma, the progression from earth to fire of Aristotle’s four elements, a sprouting seed, or cartoons representing essential relationships between form and function, all necessitate students to synthesize their ideas and express them in fundamental elements of line, form, movement and color. Creating pictures of concepts re-

quires students to make deep connections between ideas and images.

DRAWING IN MATH

I challenge my students to draw numbers. What does $1/4$ look like? Students who are able to calculate correct answers on worksheets but not

imagine what the mathematical concept looks like reveal the superficiality of their understanding. Asking students to draw in math helps me assess who really understands and who only memorizes the algorithms. Drawing also provides opportunities for students who have difficulty mastering complex algorithms to demonstrate understanding.

DRAWING IN READING

One of the key strategies in reading comprehension is making mental images. Good

continued on next page

Ted Kirby, then a fourth grader at Bowman Elementary in Lexington, Massachusetts, wrote about a shoe, illustrated it, and then wrote this description as a second draft.

My dad has big, black, size eleven Converse All Star shoes. A factory in China took the trouble to manufacture this wonderful pair of shoes. They are as dark as Darth Vader’s helmet. Almost every part of the shoes are darker than the Dark Lord himself. About the only thing that wasn’t black was a big star, as white as a full moon on a dark night in the middle. Several dotted white lines run in the center around the star. The shoes were purchased from a store last summer. My dad uses them when he’s kicking a football or making a jump shot. In other words when he plays something to get exercise. The shoes must be overjoyed to be on his feet, protecting them. And the dude in charge of Converse sure must be happy he sold this pair to keep the amount of money in his bank account high!

FIELDWORK

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Drawing Understanding, continued from page 11

readers are creating pictures in their minds as they read or listen to stories. That is imagination. Children growing up today, bombarded by pictures on television, computer screens, even picture books, find it easier to “consume” the pictures all around them than to create their own. Drawing detailed images and vivid scenes from books helps engage students in text and develop their imaginations.

DRAWING AND CHARACTER

Not only does drawing enhance understanding in the academic disciplines, it also helps students build strong character. Students will develop courage from facing the terror of a blank page; foresight from planning before they act; persistence from solving problems in balance, color and form; insight in perceiving patterns; and an eye for beauty. Creating something beautiful demands care and craftsmanship not usually expected in academic pursuits.

But art is not just the handmaiden of under-

standing, nor the tutor of character. Its true glory is in its invitation to participate in the act of creation. Listen to it beckon: Behold the forces that shape the earth; take up the stuff of mountains and the flow of rivers; catch the sparks from the sun and the stars, and dare to create a world. ✍

Steven Levy is the Northeast school designer for Expeditionary Learning. He previously taught fourth grade at the Bowman School in Lexington, MA.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

With this issue, we begin Volume X of the Expeditionary Learning newsletter. We have decided to change the name of the newsletter because of ongoing confusion with the World Wide Web. While we will miss our Web, we think Fieldwork will soon become as dear to our hearts.
