

Unifying the Curriculum with an Art Exhibition: *In the American Grain*

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This is an account of a whole-school faculty designing and teaching a five-month whole-school curriculum based on an exhibit of modern American art, *In the American Grain*, in a public school in the Pacific Northwest, grades 6–12. This account is a case-study of a successful attempt of teachers, students, and administrators at one school, in one time and place, unifying the whole curriculum by having an art exhibit at the center of learning. The account is given through many voices, especially those of the students in the school who participated in the curriculum, and the teachers who invented it. I served the school as a faculty advisor and thus the telling is in the voice of a participant-observer but I rely heavily on the experiences of the participants and their ways of telling. The students and teachers are unabashedly enthused about what they were able to accomplish in teaching and learning, and are eager to share their experiences with other learning communities. This account begins with a short history of the recently founded school and an overview of its curricular mission. It proceeds with students telling about projects they did and their experiences of the curriculum, which evolved around *In the American Grain*; teachers talking about their experiences with the curriculum; and the founding principal's responses to the curriculum. It ends with my observations and conclusions. I hope that this account might encourage other educators to initiate their own attempts at school reform by placing the arts at the center of the curriculum.

The School

Vancouver School of Arts and Academics opened in September of 1996 with 525 middle and high school students (grades 6-11 with 12th grade added the following year) in a renovated building originally constructed as a high school in 1928.² The school has a new theater, recording studio, rehearsal rooms, and art studios. The school is dedicated to "the dual mission

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of academic rigor and artistic excellence," with an evolving curriculum in which all areas of study (math, science, language arts, and social studies) and a full spectrum of arts disciplines (music, theater, dance, moving imagery, literature, and visual arts) are focused around artistic themes taught through interdisciplinary approaches.³

All students attend the school full-time. The mornings are devoted to "academics," subjects that are team-taught to "core groups" of students of combined grades (6-7-8, 9-10, 11-12) and the afternoons consist of three hours of arts instruction in elected classes of mixed-age students. There are four teachers for each core of about 100 students. Teaching and learning is project-based, interdisciplinary, on an art-centered school theme pre-selected for the year by the faculty. In selecting its theme for a year, the faculty follows the state of Washington's pattern for social studies concentrating one year on world history, the next on United States history, and the next on state history. The faculty also privileges an art form for the year: year one is visual arts; year two, music; year three drama; and so forth. Theme-related projects are conducted by students working individually or in small groups of two to three, and are usually teacher-suggested at the junior high level and student-initiated at the senior high level.

Students enroll from all areas of the Vancouver school district and neighboring districts.⁴ Students and their parents are interviewed and students are selected for the school on the basis of a demonstrated interest in the arts, not on portfolios or auditions, nor on the basis of special designations such as "gifted and talented." Most of the students are from working-class families, and most students graduating from the school go on to college.

All faculty members applied to teach at the school, and all have personal interest and expertise in one or more art forms. For example, Mr. Abramovitz teaches United States and World History and Dance; Mr. Peterson, Math and "Moving Image Arts" (video and digital media); Ms. White, Middle School Core and Theater; and Ms. Anstine, Science, Math, and Art. Ms. Brzoska, the school's founding principal, is a dancer.

In addition to teaching academic subjects and classes in the arts, faculty serve as "Advocates" for groups of 15 students in mixed-age groupings, and meet daily to discuss organizational, ethical, educational, and personal issues. The faculty of the school (about 20) is supplemented with regional artists including poets, painters, videographers, and musicians (about 25) who are frequently in the school working with small groups of students, morning academic classes, and in arts classes in the afternoon.⁵

Every Monday the school has early dismissal of students to allow the faculty the afternoon for interdisciplinary planning. After their release at 2:00 p.m., students not choosing to go home participate in extracurricular workshops, which are taught from 2:00-4:00 p.m. by community volunteers and include a wide variety of activities, from soccer to glass blowing. Monday

afternoons also accommodate students who are engaged in community service projects, apprenticeships, work experiences, and independent studies. The school does not offer varsity sports programs.

Unifying the High School Curriculum through the Arts

While planning the new school, Ms. Brzoska, the school's founding principal, answered a request for proposals announced by the Getty Education Institute in the Arts and The College Board that fit the vision of the new school.⁶ The grant was entitled "The Role of the Arts in Unifying the High School Curriculum." Vancouver School of Arts and Academics was one of five schools selected nationally for four years of funding.⁷ During the summer preceding the first school year, the sponsors held a week-long institute for the selected schools, during which time the high school staffs considered interdisciplinary teaching, engaged in interpretive arts inquiry, articulated long-range goals for their schools, and planned the curriculum for the first year of implementation. Funding included access to two consulting resource faculty, time for planning during the school year and summers, and purchase of teaching materials.⁸

In the faculty's plans for the first year of the school and in compliance with state mandates, the curriculum was to include United States history as an emphasis, with world history, and state history the following two years. When surveying local resources that could support and enhance a curriculum, the school faculty and resource faculty learned that the Portland Museum of Art was scheduled to host a traveling exhibition of early American masters of modern art. The exhibition, entitled *In the American Grain*, included works of art made between 1905-1953 by Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Alfred Stieglitz. The faculty, in consultation with the resource faculty, decided that this exhibition would serve as a very appropriate central theme around which to build curriculum. Following the summer institute, with the help of its two resource faculty members, the school faculty spent two days interpretively examining the images in the exhibition as reproduced in the exhibition catalogue.⁹ They also planned curriculum by identifying meaningful connections between the works of art, the theme of the exhibition that they identified as the emergence of modernism in the arts in America, academic subjects, and the demands of graduation requirements.

Sample Student Projects

Over its five-month duration, the curriculum that teachers and students built based on *In the American Grain* included many teacher-initiated instructional activities and many more independent projects that students

initiated. Some were completed within a brief period of time of hours or days and others were of longer duration, many as long as five months. Following are three detailed descriptions of lengthy student projects and some brief descriptions of shorter projects originating from a focus on *In the American Grain*. The faculty directed me to the first three projects, and the others I learned about by visiting classes.

Kirsten's Novella

In her self-initiated project in response to *In the American Grain*, Kirsten, a sixth grader, chose to write a piece of fiction. It turned out to be a 70-page novella, about the 1920s and 1930s in America, which she titled *Our Last Summer*. Kirsten came to the new school to write, and never before having written a long piece, decided this would be a good opportunity. She was directed in her project by Ms. Greene, a teacher with whom she studied writing in the afternoon. She spent her first two months of her project reading and was particularly taken by *The Great Gatsby* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.¹⁰ In recounting her involvement in the project, she expressed joy and amazement about being allowed to read in school.

I was just reading all these books about the 1920s and 30s. I could sit for three hours and just read. I was like, wow, reading about all these things about these people who were really there writing during this time period, and I got so many different ideas. I have never done so much reading and research.

Her reading for her novella was both general when she explored the times and social milieu and particular when she needed specific historical knowledge for the construction of her characters, some of whom she wanted to encounter a painter, Arthur Dove, from *In the American Grain*.

I knew I wanted to have four children growing up and going to the same school and have things affect them. I had to do a lot of research because I wanted the war to affect them also. And then I had to make their ages younger or older, and change their grades around. It was really hard to suggest where exactly they would find Arthur Dove. So, I chose a homeroom teacher for them who kept recommending that these kids go to a museum, that they have to see this great new artist, he's such a revolutionist, he does abstract work. Then I thought, well, it's a rainy afternoon, so they think, okay, they'll go to the museum. So they go, and it was like, wow, they had never seen work this splendid.

One of her characters becomes an opera singer. Kristen then had to resolve questions other characters would likely raise about the singer's choice, as a woman living at that time, to devote herself to a career in opera.

A singer? An actress? Why would you want to do that? Why would you go away and not get married, and if you did get married, still

have a career? And she was like, “I want to do this,” and she had to go against her parents, and she went to college. College for a girl? I had to find colleges that actually accepted girls during that time.

Kirsten spent over three months writing her novella. She revised it three times. She was aided in one of her rewrites by Andrea Carlisle, a writer living in the region who came to the school as a visiting artist. Ms. Carlisle helped Kirsten develop her characters, and suggested that she write an epilogue to clarify the story line.

This is a sample of Kristen’s writing excerpted from a section of the novella in which two of the female characters discuss their future upon graduating from high school.

The class graduated next week. The girls all bought new dresses for the occasion. It would probably be a while before they could be frivolous again. As their names were called and they walked down the aisle to get to the stage, the five friends couldn’t help grinning to each other. The night before, all had sworn to make today carefree and not to mention the war....Only Carly and Joseph were applying for college. Emaline stuck with her resolution and didn’t, though she decided if Carly got in she would move so they could get their own apartment. Joe tested and got into Columbia. They had only one summer left together before everyone’s paths split. Frankie and Mason were being shipped out for the war effort mid-September, after Frankie’s birthday.

“Would you really come to Boston with me, Emmie? You know you couldn’t have lots of parties while I’m studying.”

“It would be great. Two single girls in Boston alone sharing a room. Imagine all the stuff we could do, the clubs and dancing and food.”

“Just remember one of us has work to do. Mother is not happy about any of this. A girl in a strange city is one thing, but a girl in college in a strange city is something entirely different. If I don’t do well the first quarter, home I come.”

“Fabulous. That was never an issue, but you know, it just amazes me that you got into college. I’m not envious, but a lot of people would be. For good reasons, too.”

Rachel and Judi’s Dance

Sophomores Rachel and Judi and two other students choreographed, produced, and performed a 20-minute dance which they titled *American Continuum*. It was based on American history and inspired by *In the American Grain*. They recruited and trained a cast of seventeen, including six boys who had never before danced. The dance was in rehearsal two times a week for three months, and was performed five times for different school and community audiences.

According to Rachel, the dance was “about what it meant to be human.” It started and ended with a human clock. Between these “bookends” the

dance addressed the beginnings of modern dance, WW I, a section about the 1920s that incorporated social dance of the time, the Great Depression with an assembly line of body-percussionists, and WW II with tableaux based on the film *Schindler's List*.

When starting their project for *In the American Grain*, the four choreographers decided that they would study WW I, WW II, the 1930s, and the 1940s. In her research, Rachel studied three period novels; Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and a novel written later about the period, E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*.¹¹ Rachel's reading in the history of dance was extensive and included dance aesthetics such as manifestos about modern dance by Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Helen Tamaris. She read autobiographies by Duncan and Graham, articles by Doris Humphrey, and books of pertinent dance history such as Joseph Mazo's *Prime Movers* and Terry Walter's *The Dance in America*.¹² She read dance criticism from the period and articles made available by her teachers by and about key people in American modern dance. She also studied films about the time period such as *Modern Times*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Cotton Club*, and dance films such as *The Red Shoes*, *Tap*, and *White Nights*.

Judi said her research was broad in focus and included the novels *Ship of Fools*, *Farewell to Arms*, *Animal Farm*, and *Exodus*, and histories such as *The Generation of 1914*, and books about Hitler and the Nazis.¹³ She studied about Japanese internment camps in the United States, and about the Communist movement in America, especially through John Reed, a historical figure from the Northwest featured in the movie *Reds* who associated with Isadora Duncan and Eugene O'Neill. According to Judi,

The study we did embraced that whole culture. I had the opportunity to go in-depth to learn about stuff that I had been introduced to before. I got to do what I really wanted to do anyway and didn't get to do in my old school because I was busy writing papers about *Moby Dick* or whatever. The first thing I did was read Martha Graham's biography. I immersed myself in the whole modern art movement of that time because that really piqued my curiosity.

When I asked what they had learned by doing this project, Judi answered: "I learned how to work within a group, to have a goal, and how to get there. Before I was independent, now I learned how to work well with a team."

Rachel replied to the question by saying

I learned that you have to think. I really enjoy math, and I like to work with numbers, with patterns. So for this dance project, I gave a number to all our dancers and on my computer I put their relationships to each other in each stage in the dance. It was hard. I could see them moving in my head, but then I thought they must be here, they must

be over there. It was incredibly hard to notate this dance. We made up our own form of notation to help us remember the relationship of dancers on stage.

Rachel explained that she used mathematical patterns for her notations.

Last year I was in Algebra II, so we would study equations and how they repeat over and over. So I used them. Dances all have patterns, like these three people would come into the center and then these four people would come in the center. Dance is not always symmetrical. I could see a pattern and then it would be easier to follow, to see who is out of place, who is not following a rhythm.

Judi added,

I was in Geometry at this time and so we talked about coordinate planes and figures. This obviously all related. This is just the same as a coordinate plane. If you wanted to, you could graph each one of these dancers, which is basically what we have done, except not exactly, not with precise axes. That could be one way to notate a dance, graphing people on coordinate axes. You couldn't notate the movement that way, but you could notate the spatial relationship on an axis.

When I asked for another example of how they used math in choreographing their dance, Rachel explained,

In the first section we worked with for the modern part we mixed two pieces, "Pink Floyd" with Tchaikovsky. All the dances I had counted before had been in 8s. You know, 5-6-7-8. This dance was not in 8s. I have played piano for 8 years, so I know what $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{6}{8}$ is. But I had not yet made the connection that if I picked up a CD it would be in something besides a flat 8 count. It was in $\frac{6}{8}$ or $\frac{6}{4}$. So we had to count it in 6s. And it took us a couple weeks before we could do it, but eventually we got it right. It is hard to match the dynamic of the music with your movement if you can't count. The rhythms are really mathematical in it and that is how we taught it to the students. We talked to them in a real mathematical, rhythmical way so they could get the movement.

When I asked what they learned about United States history through the project, Rachel answered

In a typical history class, you never get past the Civil War! I think that we got so in-depth with *In the American Grain* that history became very personal. I've read textbooks and memorized facts, written them down for tests, and forgotten them the next day. But this — I wasn't in the 20s and 30s, but I had to get their emotions put into choreography. I had to think "What is the actual person thinking?" It's a different feeling when they can't eat. So I now think back on that. Now if someone says, "We're thinking of putting a blockade on, and not giving any food," I go back as if it is my own memory, but it is a memory

from doing the research. There is a difference between memorizing the date that women got to vote, and thinking “How would a woman act in this situation? How would she dance? What would she wear?”

In a separate interview at a different time, a dance teacher commented on these students’ accomplishments in creating, producing, and performing *American Continuum*.

Their dance project was really incredible. Often when you get student choreography at this age, it is very emotionally murky, or else it is just fluff. But theirs was anchored in ideas abstracted into dance and clearly tied into the time period and ideas about abstraction that they were getting from *In the American Grain*. It was awesome!

Paul’s Science Paper

Paul, a sophomore interested in art and science, wrote a 20-page paper on scientific developments during the time surrounding *In the American Grain*. Paul’s science paper project took five months, with the first month devoted to an overview of *In the American Grain* in his American Literature class. In the beginning of his paper, he writes about his personal scientific interests.

Ice cream tastes sweet and cold even though I know it as a heterogeneous mass of chemical compounds with a low amount of kinetic energy. Music pulls at my heart though I realize it is a series of compressional waves with mathematical relationships. I hug my friends while knowing that I’m not actually touching them but instead coming in contact with the electrical fields of their molecules. My scientific mind is there with me on most things, offering me an explanation, an understanding, or at least the ideas to enjoy speculating where, what, when, how, and why. Bubbles, sounds, muscles, explosions, apples, radios, gestures, stairways, elephants, everything has a scientific explanation and I revel in discovering them.

In talking with Paul, he explained his project this way.

Important advances were being made in every scientific field, not to mention the artistic field. I found a resource by Isaac Asimov, which chronicled the history of science briefly. From that, I extrapolated that particle physics, resulting in quantum mechanics, and cosmology in astronomy, resulting in relativity theory, were the most revolutionary of the advancements made during the time—the most theoretically revolutionary, anyway. Medicines and vitamin discoveries probably had more of an immediate impact, however...I decided to focus my energies into gaining a layman’s understanding of quantum mechanics and relativity. I began by reading a book on quantum mechanics and soon found it to be such a head full that I decided to forget about relativity for the rest of the project. After finishing the book, I went on to try to fully grab hold of the knowledge I’d read by writing it down so others might understand it.

Following is a paragraph from his paper in which he is in the midst of explaining the wave/particle duality in quantum mechanics.

So, when is a particle a wave and when is a wave a particle? The answer is: whenever you want them to be. This is because the very act of measuring affects a system. An electron, for example, is not definitely a particle or a wave until we try to find out what it is. The electron is in a neutral state until it is measured. With the two-slit experiment you can see the pattern that electrons make when they're waves. But if you put an electron detector, which detects electrons as particles, in the path of the beam, the pattern disappears. By measuring for particles instead of waves, a certain influence is put on the beam of electrons. Another experiment that shows this odd concept is a setup of two magnets, one above the another. When an electron is sent through the magnets it is either shot upward or downward. This measures a property called spin. Electron spins are very confusing, but when it is measured with a vertical magnet setup the electron will be either up or down. The electron has a fifty-fifty chance of coming up either way. The only way to find out if it is up or down is to send it through. It is impossible to predict ahead of time where it will go because it is the act of measuring it that makes it take on a definite state. It can even seem like the electron can anticipate the experiment beforehand and adjust itself to match. The electron in a sense is like a blob of clay. When a person manipulates it, it begins to take on properties. But before it is a work of art, it is an indeterminate mass.

He explained his motivation for engaging in this project while working within the theme of *In the American Grain*.

I chose science as my topic because science is almost parallel to my artistic interests. Both conceptual science, as well as experimental science, as well as the lives and works of scientists as people, fascinate me. Science is a great tool for understanding the world and can become a fantastic metaphor in visual arts, writing, cinema, and music.

He said that he was proud of his paper but that some of his related art projects "could have been better."

Other Student Projects

The students who worked on the dance, the novella, and the science projects were referred to me by teachers as students who had exemplary projects. On the basis of my observations, however, all the students in the school were engaged in stimulating learning. One Core group of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders divided into smaller groups. Each group selected a different artist from *In the American Grain* and built life-size tableaux of how they imagined their artist might live. They researched their respective artists, and the times in which they lived and filled the imagined rooms with interpretive references to give themselves and viewers a historical and psychological context for better understanding the artist's works.

In her middle school Core group, Robin wrote an original play about a day during the time of Vaudeville, researching events in the library to find out what happened that day in history. Aubrey worked with others to write and perform a three-women theatrical monologue based on the times: They called it *Rules for the Traditional Woman*.

Katie wrote a story and added pictures with a personal computer, including a photograph of her grandmother who recalled the times for her.

My grandmother was a child at that time and we used stuff she sent from newspapers. We wrote letters to each other, and she sent a picture of herself at that time. She had a big belly, and she had a big belly because she was not getting enough food at that time. My mom pointed that out to me. I wrote from my point of view as [if I were] a young girl at that time.

Jan chose a painting by Georgia O’Keeffe, *Pattern of Leaves*, and with a friend composed a piano piece inspired by it. Jan explained the value of her involvement in the project:

It was good for me because I got to make connections, like from the mathematician’s voice, the writer’s voice. I used my writing skills to write an impressionistic piece about the painting. It was good to use more than one artform in the project. Math was a lot of lining up of grids of music and how music lines up with the paintings. I learned how different beats were lined up and how they are measured, the way different rhythms are on top of each other.

Justin, a classical musician, and his friend, a fiddler, also chose to put music to a painting. Justin said: “We learned from each other. He taught me all about fiddle and Ragtime, and I taught him about Copeland, Gershwin, Bernstein, and other composers. We both appreciate more now.”

Tony, a sophomore, wrote and performed a fifteen-minute monologue about the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. About his project, Tony said,

I did about two months of research in that. I had done all this study, and I wrote this fictional piece of an old homeless person who had seen the massacre by accident and tells what he saw. Fun. I performed twice and got good results. The best thing was that I had five months to prepare a good piece of anything. Wrote some incredible pieces, but I never liked writing before.

Allie chose to study Alfred Stieglitz. She explained

I set up the darkroom, and then I started pursuing the work of Stieglitz on my own. I found what the teachers didn’t show us. I got really interested. He was one of the beginning Modernist photographers and I got totally into the four subjects — the technical aspects, and then science and math, and social aspects — and studying Stieglitz and stuff. I did a lot of writing like one [paper] that was fairly abstract — like making a photograph of words. I had three writings: that one, one

about Stieglitz, and one on the history of photography. I learned a lot about photography which I still do now.

Students' Perceptions of a School-wide Unified Curriculum

All the students with whom I talked, individually, in groups of 15 in Advocacy, and in groups of 30 in Core, were positive and enthusiastic about their involvement in projects built around *In the American Grain*. I was particularly interested in their view of benefits or disadvantages of the whole school focusing on *In the American Grain*, as well as learning within mixed-age groups: two special aspects of the school and operative in this particular curriculum. The following comments are from boys and girls of different ages in an Advocacy group in response to my questions about learning from others of different ages and about the benefits or pitfalls of engaging the whole school in one curricular theme.

According to Tony, a sophomore, "We learned a lot from younger students during *In the American Grain*. We learned through their presentations. There are a lot of really young students who obviously have huge amounts of experience. There are 6th and 7th graders that I just bow before because they are incredible visual artists. I completely and utterly respect them. That is probably the key thing."

Anna, a junior, said: "I prefer to be mixed with other grades. They [younger students] think of things I haven't thought of. School is about self-exploration, and it's hard to do that when it's self-contained. They [younger students] would look at an artwork and give comments about things that I never thought of. You can't afford to learn from just a few. There are so many different perspectives."

An unidentified student, perhaps a freshman or sophomore, commented: "When I see what the younger kids are doing, I think that I have to get back to being more honest about who I am, to be more like a child. And when I see the older kids, I see that they are really sophisticated and intrigued by what they are doing, and I want to be like that. We see everyone. You find your place."

Erin, a freshman, responded: "I wrote a play for *In the American Grain*. I learned a lot. In retrospect, I think I learned the most from other students. We watched the middle schoolers put on a Dada theater piece, and I had never ever seen anything like it before. I thought it was really cool, amazing. It opened me up. Up to that point I hadn't seen the middle schoolers do a lot in the academic area, and it just blew me away. They are accomplishing really cool stuff. And I learned a lot from older students and students my same age. By the end of the project, I learned probably more from other people than I did on my own."

A girl sitting next to Erin added: "Everything was connected, because every class had to be focused on *In the American Grain*. So we worked to make mathematical and scientific connections. Sometimes the connections were easy to make, sometimes not."

Audrey readily agreed, saying, "Yes, everything that was happening in the school was connected. It was cool to be on the same page with everyone else. We were all doing entirely different things, but it was all connected."

About her afternoon theater class, Erin said: "I have always worked by myself, and I learned how to work in a group better, to work as a team doing *In the American Grain* things. I learned especially from younger students who had a lot to offer because they have a lot of different experiences and backgrounds — some come from Mexico and China. Age doesn't matter."

Felicia, a 7th grader, concurred, "You can learn a lot from anyone. It doesn't matter what grade they're in. I can learn from older students or younger students. Maybe it's ignorance when people don't want to learn from others."

Teachers' Experiences of their Unique Curriculum

The teachers were as enthused as the students about working within the parameters set by *In the American Grain*. In this section, their comments give glimpses of why they were enthused and details of how they worked with the exhibit and with one another, both in academic classes and in arts classes.

Teaching Science and Art

Ms. Anstine is responsible for science and math within her Core of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers and students. In the afternoon she teaches art. She delighted in integrating science and math.

Science and math integrate so well. There are some times when those kids don't know which they are doing. I think it's wonderful. I remember a time when the kids walked in and said, "This is a science day, but aren't we doing math?" And then someone else said, "This isn't math, this is science." And they had an argument about what they were actually doing. It was indeed both. That is just what I like to see....We brought science in through the physics of light waves. I worked with another teacher and we took the kids into a darkened room. We didn't have a photo lab last year. I had kids make pinhole cameras. They did experiments within the darkened room, seeing light rays. We made connections to Stieglitz. We also looked at Man Ray's work. Before we did the pinhole cameras, we looked at Man Ray's photograms (camera-less photographic images) on light sensitive paper and we talked about emulsions on photographic paper. I'm not really a photography teacher but I've done a little bit and I knew enough to get the kids going.

She brought math in when teaching about determining exposures for making photographs.

We worked in groups, exposing [photographic paper to light] for different lengths of time. We didn't know what would happen because it happened to be a day that was very overcast with a sun that peeked out every now and then. The kids learned the relationship between aperture size and exposure times. They learned how the aperture focused the light rays. They could explain why their image was backwards, and how to turn them into positives, and to make contact exposures. They learned a little bit about chemistry, about how chemicals work with emulsions. That was very exciting to them. They got excited about photography from that one little experience. It was like magic....I found a wonderful math connection, with geometry. In my sixth and seventh grade classes, we used Georgia O'Keeffe's *Silhouette Point* to learn about tessellation. I took a print that we had from the book (the exhibition catalogue) and I made a black and white overhead from it. I put it on the screen one day and I asked the students to look for geometric shapes in it. I gave them a marking pen and they just marked right on the overhead to show, first of all, some large triangles; but then they found large triangles that I had not realized were there in the cursory glance I had taken. And then, within a few minutes, they discovered that the entire picture was a tessellation of triangles. They had spent a couple weeks on geometry at that time, so we were able to start to look at measurements and angles. They ended up doing computer tessellation. It got them excited. They saw it was the framework for the whole painting.

By her account, using *In the American Grain* as a theme "profoundly" affected her art teaching in the afternoons.

In the same way that it got students to really focus, it got me to focus more in-depth than I am used to doing, than I have done for a long time. But I think the main thing for me was the excitement I saw and how I saw the students grow. I think about one little sixth grader who knew nothing about this collection of paintings when he began it; but by the time he went to the art museum, he could identify every painting by title and almost by date. He could approximate the date. He could make very thorough comparisons in terms of style. He knew enough about the artist's life. He could tell us reasons why he thought things were painted as they were. At the museum, he followed me around and would not stop talking. So those kinds of experiences and stories are wonderful.

Some kids told me how they were not particularly impressed with the artworks. One girl told me she went to the art museum and didn't like it, that it was boring, but then she went back on her own on Saturday and spent three hours there and saw all kinds of other works. I heard a lot of kids say that they went back. That's impressive.

When asked what she would watch out for in using a thematic approach, she offered the following recommendations.

It takes a lot of communication among teachers to make sure that the kinds of connections you are making are meaningful, that they are not scattered or fragmented. I think that is the thing to guard against. The connections need to be meaningful to kids, too. They need not just be things that we as adults think are wonderful. A theme like *In the American Grain* just gets you started. There are many things that could work as that central theme or idea or concept. There are so many ways to organize curriculum. But I think it does matter how broad or how narrow the theme is because you don't want to be way out there bouncing off the walls. It needs to be narrow enough so that you can find some continuity for the kids and for yourself. It has to have different perspectives that you wouldn't have if you were teaching subjects separately, going straight through textbooks. Totally exciting ideas can come out of a theme.

Perspectives of the Dance Teachers

During a meeting held after school hours, the school's five dance teachers told me their experiences about teaching thematically with *In the American Grain*. Here are excerpts from a transcript of that meeting.

Mr. Abramovitz reported,

I have never been in a school before this one where the content and ideas that were fueling us as dancers were the same content and ideas the students were studying in their academic classes. That was unique. It took me in such a juicy way. I found myself become a learner on a level I have not experienced since college. Last year during *In the American Grain* we got very interested in looking at early modern dancers. So we chose different artists. My artist was Isadora Duncan. I found myself doing some real quality research in a passionate way that got me so excited to share with the other faculty and the students. It stretched me both as a mover and as a thinker.

Ms. Johnson commented, "Each of us chose an artist and we gave each other information that helped us teach. Lots of us collaborated. We did in-services for each other."

Ms. Gilsdorf made these observations.

In the American Grain covered such a rich time period when dance formed in our country. When I was in college and taking dance history of this period, I wasn't really interested in history. It was stuff I knew, but I didn't know it in such a rich level. Looking at it now, I am ready to learn this stuff now, to relearn and to really get it.... We were building on all this reading and writing based on *In the American Grain*, all this conceptual conversation. We looked at videotapes, all these resources. It was a struggle to balance when to move with, when to think, write, and discuss with the students.... I had some great experiences last year teaching dance in the Core, bringing 100 kids into Room 205. And we all danced the Charleston together and they were ready to do that, not just because some of them were in dance class; but all of them had been hearing about that period [from studying *In*

the *American Grain*] and were ready. Not one kid was standing with arms crossed, when typically in a group that big, somebody would. They all just did it.

According to Ms. Johnson,

My mind was popping connections every minute, just like the kids. As I began thinking about these dance artists, as I started connecting all these ideas, it made me reflect, made me aware of Graham in very different ways, to create that environment that they existed in, the political and social environment, the music they were hearing. It made me reflect on my own discipline in an entirely different way, and I could bring that reflection to the kids. I was a learner again in the most intense way. Last year was so exhausting, but I never got tired in an intellectual way. I was totally fascinated: like the family tree—discovering our connections all the way back, and with each other, too. We kept getting more enthusiastic.

Mr. Abramovitz added, “*In the American Grain* brought us together. We’d meet at people’s houses. We had such a passion, an excitement about it.”

Ms. Tresvan exclaimed, “Talk about *In the American Grain* being reinvented! We didn’t even get to all of it!”

Ms. Gilsdorf enthused, “We’d meet a minimum of three hours. We actually talked about philosophical things. I thought, ‘Wow, I have colleagues!’ I miss that this year. I really do. It was so good.”

Mr. Abramovitz talked about how having a focus point was a unifying process in many ways.

The theme brought us together. Teachers are traditionally isolated. It is about bringing us together as individuals. I guess, it is about bringing us as separate individuals together. It is about bringing me as a learner, bringing each student, bringing how my body moves with how my mind moves. It’s bringing it together with history, my aesthetic — bringing me together. My process of bringing it together helps me bring my students together, these aspects together — a coalescence.”

Ms. Johnson gave these reasons for her wholehearted approval of the central theme.

In the American Grain made me focus my ideas and I could be creative in a confined space. I feel like I did some of my best work because I didn’t have to search around for what am I going to do today. I knew. I knew that this was the body of what I was addressing. It was satisfying that this was the conversation we all were having. It was all encompassing. It gave a reference point to curriculum.

Ms. Summer used metaphors to explain her positive feelings about the experience. “We dove into the water every single class. We were swimming through it instead of skimming across the top. It was like sitting down and

having a wonderful meal instead of going to a buffet and sampling every single thing that is offered up there and not feeling satisfied at the end of it. But really being able to savor everything.”

Expanding on her analogies, Mr. Abramovitz gave reasons why the theme was beneficial to images of the field of dance and its practitioners. “I ask, why is that so important for us to do? There is that stereotype of the dumb dancer, the shallow dancer; and what we did last year says, “We have so much depth; we are not shallow as a discipline, as individuals.” It was very nourishing. We can savor, we can go in-depth, not just do the light bit of everything, the smorgasbord.”

The Principal’s Perspective

Ms. Brzoska, founding principal of the school, is very positive about the school’s engagement with *In the American Grain* at the center of the curriculum for Vancouver School of Arts and Academics. Regarding the benefits of the unified curriculum, she remarked,

It astounded everyone here because of all of the potential connections....What we were able to develop with the collection had so much relevance to the high school curriculum. We discovered that the doors were held open for linkages to content and curricular issues that are currently taught in high schools, whether it is social studies or science, literature, languages, or the arts.

She cautioned anyone about making immediate transfers to schools of their own. Asked if she thought constructing and implementing a whole-school, thematic, arts-based curriculum was a good idea, she replied

Only if you hire all the teachers. I had the opportunity in forming the new school to hire all these people. I would do it again if I could hire all the people. I would not do it if I didn’t. I would not try to lay thematic art-centered teaching, especially on math and science teachers, nor communities of students and families who did not choose it. Teachers, parents, and students who couldn’t choose. I would not want to force that. If they don’t embrace the notion of the arts at the center, I care too much about the arts to force that on them. If people want to come to this, they need to look at their own situation and ask, “Do I have people who are excited, learning people, who are passionate about studying things at new angles, who love the arts, who are curious, who want to develop curriculum, who have the time to adapt? Are the administrators willing to support those people with funding and systems and encouragement?” If “Yes” to that, then yes absolutely! But I think what we so often do in education is to come up with something that worked in one place, and then principals go to conventions and learn about it, and bring it back and hand it off. I haven’t had very positive experiences with that.

She also offered a profile of teachers who might and who might not excel in an environment such as VSAA's:

It's not necessarily someone with a background in the arts. A handful of teachers who have no background in the arts were as excited about this work as anyone on this faculty. In fact, they probably had a more open approach than some whose field is art....These are veteran teachers. They have been in education a long time and, everywhere they have been they have been learning and trying new things. That's number one. Life-long learners, curiosity. They would not be willing to be handed a syllabus because they do not know how to breathe life into something that doesn't come from something that they have experienced. People who want to collaborate — that's big — and people who know what that means and have tried it and know that they like it.

Regarding what teachers would need to know about the collaborative environment, she replied:

If you are a person who likes to have your own room, your own stuff, peace and quiet, a restful environment that you are in control of, don't come here. It will be chaos for you and you will be unhappy. It is shared space. Someone who can't get over not being able to find a stapler won't be happy here.

Other Observations

There are some crucial factors for the success of this curricular venture that do not explicitly emerge in the interviews used for this study but which became apparent to me as an observer in the school before, during, and after the school's involvement with *In the American Grain*.

First, the exhibit was a particularly apt choice for a school whose curricular mandate that year was to study American history. It had important thematic content, namely, the emergence of modern art in America. The artists and the works included in *In the American Grain* are seminal in the development of modern art in America, including photography. The artistic sensibilities of Stieglitz and the artists he gathered around him were in harmony with American dancers, musicians, poets, and novelists of the time. The time period it covered, 1920-1950, included important world events, especially World Wars I and II, and national events such as the Great Depression. This exhibit offered thematic material that was broad enough in scope and rich enough in content to allow many meaningful connections to the art and academic disciplines the school teaches. The exhibition also provided boundaries that guided curricular exploration. The artworks in the exhibition are of a discrete period of time, executed in America with acknowledgments to European artists, in photography and mixed media, as well as

painting, and broadly embrace abstraction over realistic representation. The students and faculty had the distinct advantage of seeing the artworks in their original state when the traveling exhibition came to the local museum. Equally as important, the exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue full of color reproductions from which the teachers could make transparencies for classroom use.

The selection of an appropriate unifying theme is essential. The faculty realized how good a choice it made in selecting *In the American Grain* as a theme while they were planning and teaching the curriculum, but they especially came to appreciate their choice the following year when they chose a theme that turned out to be too broad and too loosely defined. They chose the theme of Diaspora to accommodate World History. Because the theme was so open to interpretation, the school curriculum quickly fractured, the content pursued in core classes looked very much like what might be taught in traditional self-contained classrooms, and afternoon arts classes adopted a focus of "art of many cultures" which lacked the unity that *In the American Grain* had provided the previous year. Music was their privileged artform for the year, but the faculty did not select any particular piece of music that might have presented them a unifying metaphor. Certainly learning occurred, but it was without the whole-school focus that teachers and students enjoyed the previous year.

The next year the faculty chose more wisely. Required to teach state history, they selected literature as their unifying artform, and chose a book of essays written in and about Washington and the Pacific Northwest as their central artwork, and they adopted the book's title, *The Good Rain*, as their unifying curricular metaphor.¹⁴ They were also able to bring the author of the book to the school as a visiting artist.

Second, the founders of the school, in their wisdom, mandated consistent and frequent paid planning time for teachers. Every Monday afternoon of the school year, and some paid days in the summertime, are dedicated to planning the future and assessing the past.

Third, as Ms. Brzoska forthrightly explained, the faculty was hired to teach in a manner fitting with the *In the American Grain* curricular project. This is a school where the faculty and the principal share the same vision. The teachers are willing participants of a grand experiment, one that has not been imposed upon them.

Fourth, the school also enjoys the strong support of its students who, with the blessings of their parents, voluntarily applied to attend the school. With a clearly articulated mission of offering an arts-centered curricula, strong in academics, and without varsity sports, the administrators and faculty are able to attract like-minded students, and to guide away those who are not likely to be a good match.

Conclusions

Some important conclusions can be drawn from this single case of curricular innovation. The curriculum of a whole school for ordinary students in grades six through high school in a typical American public school district can be integrated and unified by means of an art exhibition. Academic subjects of math, science, social studies, English literature and composition, foreign languages, and arts classes, can all be taught with artworks as a central and unifying curricular focus.

Learning that results from a thematic curriculum can be very diverse and multi-faceted. Students can be motivated to excel individually and in cooperative learning groups when working within a thematic arts curriculum. Their concentration can be engaged for lengthy segments of time, up to five months, by a compelling artistic theme with exemplifying works of art. Students both young and old can learn from one another when they are thinking about common artistic content. Teachers need not know all there is to know about an art exhibition before they begin teaching on the basis of the exhibition. Teachers and students can learn from one another. Teachers can be invigorated by planning for the whole school, and by planning for their own specific discipline. Teachers can also teach one another in preparation for teaching their students. A school can be successfully transformed by placing arts at the center of its curriculum, especially when teachers and a principal select art that captivates them and their students, are willing to venture into new territory, and have adequate time to plan and teach and reflect.

NOTES

1. *In the American Grain: Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Alfred Stieglitz* (Washington DC: The Stieglitz Circle at the Phillips Collection, 1995).
2. Vancouver School of Arts and Academics, Shumway Campus, is located at 3101 Main Street, Vancouver, WA 98663. Deborah Brzoska, founding Principal, Marna Stalcup, Getty/College Board project coordinator. The student population is 88% white, 4% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 2% black, 2% needing learning support, and 6% needing special assistance in English.
3. *A Review of Vancouver School of Arts and Academics School Performance Report*, a promotional pamphlet published by the school district.
4. The Vancouver district serves 20,400 students in grades K-12. Vancouver is a city of 50,000 people and is situated on the Columbia River across from Portland, Oregon, which has a population of 500,000.
5. While studying *In the American Grain*, many visiting artists worked with the students, including authors, actors, dancers, instrumentalists, singers, a songwriter, a filmmaker, a photographer, and a performance artist. The school also enjoys partnerships with such community resources as the Oregon Symphony, the Portland Museum of Art, the Portland Institute for Contemporary Arts, Lit-

- erary Arts, Inc., the Vancouver Symphony, Blue Parrot Theatre, Vancouver Pops, Brass Reed & Guitar, and several businesses.
6. The Role of the Arts in Unifying the High School Curriculum, 1995-1999: Getty Institute for Education in the Arts, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 600, Los Angeles, CA 90049 and The College Board, 45 Columbus Avenue, New York, NY 10023. The grant provided funding for three years and supported the purchase of supplementary teaching materials, resource faculty, release time for in-service training in curriculum development and inquiry-based instruction, and two one-week workshops off-site for selected members of the faculty.
 7. Boston Latin School, Boston; Las Cruces High School, New Mexico; Lopez High School, Brownsville, Texas; Suitland High School, Maryland; and Vancouver School of Arts and Academics. Las Cruces and Boston Latin schools dropped out of the project before its completion in 1999.
 8. The author and Alice Kawazoe, Ph.D. Superintendent of Curriculum, Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, CA served as the consultant faculty. The resource persons visit the school about four times a year, devoting about eight days a year meeting with the school's curriculum planning team and the whole faculty, and providing in-service sessions on interdisciplinary, curriculum planning, and inquiry-based instruction within a comprehensive arts program.
 9. Elizabeth H. Turner, *In the American Grain — Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Alfred Stieglitz: The Stieglitz Circle at the Phillips Collection* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995.)
 10. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner's, 1925) and Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Harper, 1943).
 11. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Random House, 1906) and E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1974).
 12. Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Bonni Liveright, 1927); Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); Doris Humphrey, "The Breaking Point," *Dance Observer*, March 1962; Joseph Mazo, *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America* (New York: Morrow, 1977); and Terry Walter, *The Dance in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).
 13. Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools* (Boston: Little Brown, 1962); Ernest Hemingway, *Farewell to Arms* (New York: Collier Books, 1929); George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946); Leon Uris, *Exodus* (New York: Bantam, 1983); and Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
 14. Timothy Egan, *The Good Rain* (New York: Knopf, 1990).