

Great Teaching | Great Learning

BY NADINE FIEDLER

Classes that embody the spirit of education at Catlin Gabel

From the preschool in the Beehive to the 12th grade in the Dant House, Catlin Gabel is alive every day with extraordinary classes. Here are five examples of electrifying teachers and their eager learners.

UNDERSTANDING OREGON'S HISPANIC COMMUNITY, HANDS-ON

Students in Lauren Reggero-Toledano's class work with Spanish speakers

It's snack time after siesta at A Child's Place in Hillsboro. In a sunlit room, still-sleepy little children chatter in Spanish and nibble on cheese sandwiches. As bright as the sun streaming in are the faces of the three Catlin Gabel students sitting here, totally engaged with the kids who adore them right back.

These students are part of Lauren Reggero-Toledano's Spanish 5 class, which distinguishes itself by requiring field experience in the Spanish-speaking community. In its second year in this incarnation, the class emphasizes culture and civilization, with a second-semester focus on the Hispanic experience in Oregon. "There's a huge Spanish-speaking population here, so we decided to learn more about them," Lauren says.

Lauren developed this class to accommodate different learning styles. She says, "These students have a passion for Spanish and want to continue learning and practicing it, but are looking for something more applied."

The community projects in the class cover a wide range and reflect the students' particular interests. Two students work on Spanish-language radio programs, one with migrant farm worker families, and one in a Spanish-language theatre group. Catlin Gabel has long connections with these agencies: both middle and high school students have done community service at A Child's Place, and many other high schoolers are frequent volunteers at a homework club for children of migrant workers. This year Lauren's students also attended a workshop on immigration law related to migrant families and visited a migrant labor camp to better understand their living conditions.

"The class strengthens our contacts in the community and brings more consistency to the agencies we work with," says Lauren. "It's a positive experience for everyone, and more agencies ask to work with our students, which gives the students more exposure."

When the class meets back at Catlin Gabel, Lauren brings the service work back to what they've learned in class. She asks: "What are you observing? Did your reading help? Did you hear different languages?"

This community work builds the students' confidence,



Lauren Reggero-Toledano with Spanish 5 students Maiya Zwerling '09 and Nathan Greenberg '09



Skyler Middleton '09 volunteering at A Child's Place

but right now they are a bit nervous and excited as they begin this chapter in experiential learning. "The students grasp that the work is meaningful, and they see that they can help, especially with the children," she says. "But it's not just that we're going to help or right the world. We experience their world and learn from them."

Next year Lauren and Spanish teacher Roberto Villa will try something new with the class: half the year Roberto will teach a literature and grammar seminar, and in the other half all the students will be involved in service work. "We will consider this a success when all our students work in the community," says Lauren. "It's eye-opening for them. They often tell us that they had no idea before about the lives led by these neighbors of ours."



LAUREN REGGERO-TOLEDANO Lauren got involved in the local Spanish-speaking community in her hometown of Middletown, New York. "I'm from an immigrant Greek-American family. I saw how difficult it is for immigrants to live when I was growing up," she says. She went on to the University of Miami, studied for a year in Spain, then earned a master's in Spanish language and culture from the University of Salamanca in Spain. Her husband, Juan Carlos, is from Adra, Almería, Spain. They're raising their daughter Elena, 1, to speak Spanish.

ART HISTORY THROUGH THEIR FINGERTIPS

Dale Rawls's 8th grade art students "become" noted artists

Art history can be bewildering for middle school students. The works of famous artists can seem remote, lost to time and the changes of culture. But art teacher Dale Rawls has found an antidote to that.

Through study of famous artists and art periods, and research into their social and historical contexts, each of Dale's 8th grade students chooses what intrigues him or her—and then create a work of art, a copy or a work in that style, over the class's 18-day unit. The students immerse themselves in Andy Warhol, say, or Wayne Thibaud, or Jackson Pollock, and in the act of interpreting they come to learn right in their own eyes, hands, and brains what makes that artist unique—and the challenges and joys of art-making.

The process begins with students learning to do web-based research on artists and periods. "I have them see that artists don't create their work in a vacuum; they train, they perfect their craft, they reflect their culture," says Dale. Then they choose to either make a direct copy, or work in the style but with their own subject matter. That exercise leads directly to problem solving as they grapple with questions about the materials the artist used, and finally how to turn this image and idea into something real—something on paper or canvas, or created with a camera and altered in Photoshop.

Dale builds on what he's taught before, and what the students already know, by using the same vocabulary of art that he's used for their first two years in middle school, concepts such as composition, light source, symmetry, color, and texture. "This project is a real epiphany for many students," says Dale. "They realize how they can use a particular color, or make the work a particular size, and they become more self-directed. They ask for help, and they struggle with it, and I have to zoom around and help everyone, but it's a project they really run with."

This class is also these students' first experience in formal painting composition. "In the midst of all this work, I show them how paintbrushes differ and teach painting



Dale Rawls with Sophie Paek '15. Below: Artwork by Owen Chapman '13 after Andy Warhol, and Koby Yudkin '13 after Shepard Fairey



technique," says Dale. "This work teaches safe risk-taking, because you can just paint over it if you take a take a chance and fail." It also provides a high level of understanding in design and media for more advanced art studies in high school.

The result is amazing. Some works are more polished than others, but they all capture the essence the student responded to in the first place. The students take enormous pride in their finished project: one Warhol-inspired painting sports a huge, confident signature, ANNE—just like Andy Warhol would have done.



DALE RAWLS

Dale Rawls got his start in art when a perceptive teacher in his Hillsboro high school recognized his artistic talents. He went on to study at Portland State University under many renowned local artists. In later pursuit of a master's in education he examined whether making art feeds

teaching or vice versa. "I concluded that each nurtures the other," he says. He and his wife, Barbara, whom he married when both were at PSU, have maintained a studio and shown in galleries for 35 years.

"I love that Catlin Gabel values me both as a teacher and an artist. I'm not just teaching here, I'm talking about what's essential to my being," he says. One of the best things a student ever said to him was that Dale doesn't teach them just so they learn technique, he teaches them how to articulate important things in their lives through art.



and it gets them to see a different part of Rummage,” says Cindy.

When the sale arrives in late fall, each student first samples shoppers in one location for just one hour; the information from all the students shows the changes over the course of a day. Next the students all go at once, and each samples shoppers in a different department to see how that varies. The students learn to analyze the data, and in the spring they present their finished report to Lesley and the Rummage committee.

Left: Cindy Beals teaching statistics. Below: A shopper peruses books at the Rummage Sale



The students’ surveys have resulted in real improvements to the sale. When it was clear from the survey that long lines were a serious problem, the committee decided to have seniors work as cashiers, speeding up the checkout process. “Having their work result in actual changes inspires them to do a thorough job so that we affect future Rummage sales,” says Cindy.

THE STATISTICS OF RUMMAGE

Cindy Beals’s students survey Rummage shoppers for vital info

Catlin Gabel students are all over the Rummage Sale, but Cindy Beals’s statistics students are unique: they’re the ones with the clipboards politely asking shoppers to fill out surveys.

Cindy and her honors math class have worked for the past five years to provide information the school needs to run a better Rummage Sale. The project was the brainchild of Rummage coordinator Lesley Sepetoski, who wanted to find out more about the demographics of the sale’s shoppers. Who’s buying what, and when? How far did people drive to get there, and is Expo a good location? What were they hoping to find? Lesley asked Cindy if she might be interested in involving students in finding the answers, and Cindy knew it would be a perfect fit for her yearlong statistics class. It would allow her and the students to apply the theory they learn, and it would give them a chance to see the messy process of statistics in the real world.

The cycle begins early in the fall, when Lesley tells them what she’d like to know. The class thinks about possible questions: how the question order makes a difference, or how slightly different wording can provoke different answers. Then they create their questionnaire.

An important aspect is learning the right way to approach Rummage shoppers so they see the students as respectful and will take the time to answer. “It’s scary for some kids to approach the shoppers, but that’s another part of the learning experience. All of them end up talking to people they wouldn’t have much chance to otherwise,

Cindy is a huge fan of the Rummage Sale, which makes

this a doubly fulfilling project for her: “It’s exhilarating for me to see learning happen. And Rummage is such an amazing thing we do for so many reasons: because it provides financial aid for our students, as a service to the wider community, for getting out our name, for recycling, and for drawing the Catlin Gabel community together, including alumni. I love that I can support Rummage as a part of my job.”



CINDY BEALS

Cindy was honored with a Fulbright Award to teach in Turkey in 2009-10. She says she has “insatiable wanderlust,” and took a sabbatical in 2000-01 for a trip around the world. At CGS she has led or chaperoned trips to Turkey and India, where many members of her family have lived for generations. A native of northern California, Cindy earned a BA in math from Michigan Tech and an MS from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Before coming to Catlin Gabel in 2004, she taught at two schools in Michigan and at Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire.



Left: 4th graders in character as immigrants arriving at “Ellis Island.” Above: The 3-D faces of the immigrant characters

WHO ARE THE U.S. AMERICANS?

Rebecca Plaskitt’s 4th graders study immigration through story

To the Catlin Gabel 4th grade, immigrants are not just odd people who speak funny languages—because the immigrant’s stories have become the students’ own stories. These students create characters from immigrant groups, then track them starting with their arrival in the U.S. and ending with their new lives as they establish themselves. By the end of the study, they care about their character, they understand the historical perspective of immigration, and they come to see the commonalities among all of us in this country—not only the differences.

The structure for this study comes from the Storyline method, in which teacher Rebecca Plaskitt is an international expert. “The basis of Storyline is that children learn through the power of story, with characters, settings, ways of life, incidents, and conclusions,” she says. “By making characters they are more likely to become emotionally involved in what happens and in their character’s experiences.”

Throughout the Storyline, students in both Rebecca’s and Mariam Higgins’s 4th grade classes pick an ethnic group and gender for the character they choose, based on whom they think has the best chance to make a life in a new country. They talk about the skills this person would need to get a job and get started, and they research their country of origin.

The students make 3-D faces for their characters, and dress them in the clothing they might have worn upon arrival in New York. In the next part of the Storyline, students are randomly assigned to roles as immigrants or workers at Ellis Island. As staffers, the students might work in security or baggage, or as doctors, psychiatrists, or money changers.

“We talk about the significance of feeling like they don’t have any choices,” says Rebecca. “We ask the kids playing immigrants how they feel about the workers who will make decisions

for them and maybe send them back home. We ask the workers to reflect on their role: do they like being able to control someone else?” And for one eagerly anticipated day, the inside and the outside of the classroom becomes Ellis Island, and each student plays a role in this tense chapter of immigration.

The drama begins when the costumed immigrants disembark outside with their bundles and carefully researched documents. The workers, equally prepared with official procedures and documentation, are anxious about what might happen during their shift, when they may admit or detain the immigrants.

The process includes lots of reflection about what they’ve been through. At the end, the students write and act out a script about their characters getting work and a new home. At a culminating presentation to parents, students share the immigrants’ story, including a narrated slideshow of the events at their Ellis Island and entries from journals they’ve kept for their character.

The Storyline experience engages the 4th graders in high-level thinking by asking them to build on new information and create something entirely new. And through the process, they also learn history, compassion, and understanding.



REBECCA PLASKITT

Rebecca Plaskitt, a Catlin Gabel teacher since 2004, has presented Storyline courses at conferences in Europe, and she was honored as outstanding student teacher of the year by Phi Delta Kappa after receiving her teaching degree. “I love being with kids and creating. I’ve never taught two years the same way. I really like how Catlin Gabel considers the whole child, not just academic ability but emotions, and confidence, and how the child fits in the group. Everyone is so willing to help, and everyone knows the kids so well. The one thing that’s different here from most other schools is that you can love the children here: it’s totally okay and a great part of teaching,” she says.



Kindergarteners made models of water projects and drawings for Little Eagle Creek, the new water feature



WATER AND WONDER

Kindergarteners help design a new water feature

Water, water everywhere! If you walked into the kindergarten this year, you'd see 34 glass jars of water, collected by each student. Near the doorway, a picture graph showed the 42 cups of water wasted if you run the water while brushing your teeth. Diagrams of storm drains showed children's thinking about pipes and water systems. Drawings of families at the beach or in rivers told stories about how children love to play in the water.

All this thinking and learning about water was sparked by a gift from a former Beehive parent, who left its final use up to the teachers. Their inspiration was the delight a water feature in the outside courtyard would provide for their students.

"The best thing about this gift was that we were given money to dream and invent something we had always wanted for the Beginning School. We wanted a project that would be interactive and imaginative. This will be a classroom learning project for years to come," says the kindergarten team of Joanne Dreier, Betsy McCormick, and Sue Henry.

So began a brand-new teaching project for these three, evolving over several months of daily discovery. They wanted the children to be involved in the water feature from the beginning, so they told them about the gift and asked for their ideas about bringing water to the courtyard. In further exploration of water Joanne, Betsy, and Sue taught sophisticated concepts such as fluid dynamics, the water cycle, displacement, filtering, and conservation. "To experience these things as young children, when scientific concepts are yet to be developed, brings a sense of exploration, challenges assumptions, and sparks wondering," the teachers say.

The kindergarten team began the journey by asking the students and their families to provide a memory of family fun in the water. Further activities included collecting water in the small jars, which brought in samples from Mt. Hood snow to bubble bath water. Soon the children

became campus "water detectives," seeking out water and figuring out where it comes from and where it goes. Each child designed and made a clay water catcher to collect water drops, because rain water will be the main source for the water feature. They experimented with displacement, finding out to their surprise that grapes sink and squashes float. They learned how to make water go uphill. Small groups of children collaborated to create models of possible

water features, from ponds to waterfalls to streams to mazes to fountains.

The final design of Little Eagle Creek incorporates students' ideas and invites them to do what they love to do with water: dam, splash, play, and learn. Best of all, the construction was done before the end of the school year so that these ingenious kindergartners—and their ingenious teachers—could enjoy the embodiment of their ideas and their common explorations.

THE KINDERGARTEN TEAM: SUE HENRY, BETSY MCCORMICK, JOANNE DREIER
Sue, Betsy, and Joanne have been working as a team for more than 20 years. Joanne and Betsy are classroom teachers, and Sue is in charge of projects. They are quoted collectively here because their ideas spark from one to the other, and it's hard to say where one stops speaking and another begins. They are that united, and they are quick to say "although we each bring different things to the table, we all have a serious commitment to young children. We are all instinctively able to recognize what young children love to do. We're sort of like the children ourselves."



"We're committed to teaching the basic skills of math and literacy, but equally important, our job is to listen, question, and set up a thought-provoking environment. The kindergartners' job is to make sense of their world."

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