Exploring Emily Carr: A Narrative Timeline of an Elementary Visual Arts/Literacy Initiative

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Abstract

The purpose of integrating art into the school curricula is to help students to make connections in their learning experiences and to engage them within their special learning styles. Teachers can assist students in making these connections within subjects and across subject lines, and to connect new learning to what they already know. This article, taking the form of an informal running narrative, will explore the role of the arts in education and how one elementary school in St.Catharines, Ontario, Glenridge Public School, used the writings and artwork of the Canadian art icon Emily Carr, as stimulus for cross-curricular links and for building community among various members in the education sector.

Why Include the Arts in Education?

Art is a part of every culture. In traditional societies the arts, rituals and ceremonies were an integral part of educating and socializing the children in cultural expectations, history, and current thought (Naested, 1998. pg. 20). These societies did not have a separate part of their cultural life called “art” – it was simply a part of their daily life.

Modern western societies appear to have forgotten the reasons for, and value of, educating the young in the arts. Many recent studies have documented why the arts are integral to a child’s growth and development. According to the Ministry of Education Backgrounder(May 2006) “ Extensive research demonstrates the links between arts education and academic success, and literacy and numeracy. Students scored significantly higher, 11 percent, in computation and estimation after three years of a sustained arts program than students in a study’s control group.” That same month, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario released a statement on Arts Education. The Hon. Caroline di Cocco, the then Minister of Culture shared,” Innovation and creative thinking is what we want to teach our young people in the 21st century. We want to provide them with the kind of education that engages them, inspires them and teaches them to think for themselves. A focus on creativity through the arts will ensure our children get the well-rounded education they need to succeed in our complex and rapidly changing world”.

This paper will explore through an informal narrative structure, how one elementary school took on the arts through a powerful example of dedicated and enthusiastic teachers, administration, and community outreach.

September 2006 – Planting the Seed

In the fall of 2006, through a connection and initial request made by Dr. Sheila Bennett, the then Chair of the Preservice Dept. in the Faculty of Education at Brock University, I met with the principal of Glenridge Public School, Mr. Blair Harley. As a former Visual Arts Consultant with the Toronto District School Board, I was often called upon by principals to help brainstorm and jump start Visual Arts initiatives in schools across the greater Toronto area. So, when this opportunity presented itself, I knew some

possible roads I wanted to go down! After doing some preliminary research, I knew the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto was hosting a large Emily Carr retrospective in the spring of 2007. As a firm believer in integrating museum/gallery visits in the learning experience, I thought about a whole school art/literacy focus – all around the art, writings and life of the Canadian artist Emily Carr. As I walked into Principal Harley's office, there in front of me, sitting on his desk, was a framed reproduction of one Emily Carr's most famous works, *Indian Church* (1929). I pulled out my brochure on upcoming exhibitions/programming at the AGO, presented my idea about an Emily Carr whole school focus, and we were flying! As I looked around his office, I noticed he had a number of Emily Carr reproductions hanging on his walls. A strong art supporter himself, Principal Harley was eager to get the ball rolling. We brainstormed some more, and before I left, we set up a date when I would come in to meet his teaching staff and to present my idea of a cross-curricular Emily Carr initiative. A principal connecting to the preservice dept. at the local university – a true partnership was beginning!

October 2006 – Staff Climbs on Board

A few weeks later, after having gathered resources on Emily Carr, and putting together a few ideas of curriculum projects/content links, I made a presentation at an after school staff meeting at Glenridge PS. A small staff, not more than nine teachers, teaching from Kindergarten to Grade 6, gave me their undivided attention. After a warm introduction by Principal Harley, I shared my ideas around a whole school arts initiative and Emily Carr. They were receptive from the start! I left some resources with them at the school, and before leaving, was formally introduced to one teacher, Mrs. Paulette Alcox, who would serve as the on site co-ordinating teacher for the Emily Carr project. A lover of Carr's work herself, this introduction with Mrs. Alcox led to a professional relationship with a gifted teacher which I know will only grow. I left making plans to connect via email to plan the project structure and to establish a tentative time-line.

November/December 2007 – The Pot Starts Cooking

As the year progressed Paulette and I emailed each other ideas and possibilities for individual classroom projects/creative approaches to delivery and possible extensions to the school-based learning taking place in the individual classrooms at Glenridge. Paulette had gathered the teachers and asked for their particular strengths, hidden talents and willingness to experiment in areas unknown. We met once more before the holidays started at the end of December, and by that point, I had booked the entire staff, including Principal Harley and myself, into the AGO's Emily Carr teacher evening which was scheduled for an evening in March 2007. In the past, having helped the AGO develop their teacher evenings, I knew how quickly these evenings filled up! They always served as an excellent Professional Development experience for teachers, as well as a much needed opportunity for socializing and networking with fellow art educators from across the Greater Toronto Area. As teachers most often work in a vacuum in their classrooms, I thought that this evening would serve as a perk in recognition of their hard work and involvement in the Emily Carr project.

January 2007 -Concrete Plans: Curriculum Connections / Projects/ Service Learning Links/ Exhibitions

In mid-January, Paulette and I met again at Glenridge. Over the holidays, using the resources which we had gathered and compiling the information from her peers on staff, Paulette developed a concrete framework for the delivery of the Emily Carr project. We sat down together and tweaked the timeline to meet some outlying factors which were time sensitive. Besides the actual teaching performed by the Glenridge teachers, I was gathering interested elementary preservice candidates from our Bachelor of Education program at Brock, along with interested senior secondary visual arts students from the local high school, Sir Winston Churchill SS. These two groups of students would assist the teachers in teaching the various art projects inspired by Emily Carr and serve as classroom “studio assistants”. Exhibiting the completed student work was also part of our overall plan. Two exhibitions was our goal – the first would be a whole school art exhibition which included at least one piece of work by each student to held at the school, the second, would be a smaller “juried exhibition” of selected works to be held at Rodman Hall Arts Centre, the local community art gallery, now under the direction and ownership of Brock University (since 2004). After incorporating all the various components of what we wanted to achieve, our timeline was confirmed.

January /February 2007 – Getting Started / Literacy Initiatives

To inaugurate the project, an assembly was held for all the students in the school gym. The purpose? To introduce each and every student to the artist and Canadian icon Emily Carr. A short film was shown and a discussion period was held where students were encouraged to ask questions and begin the journey of getting to know Emily Carr as an artist and as a person. After the assembly and back in their classrooms, each teacher engaged their individual class in various introductory reading and writing lessons based on their grade level. These literacy projects took the form of writing letters to Emily Carr, personal journals, and expressive writing reflecting on the paintings of Emily Carr. One teacher was quoted as saying “ The writing completed by the primary students in response to their learning about Emily was the best writing they had done all year! They were passionate and gave personal voice to their feelings because they ‘met’ Emily through her art.”

February / March 2007 - In the Studio with Emily Carr

The next step of the project was geared around the studio art component – the making of art! For four consecutive Friday afternoons, Glenridge PS was converted into Emily Carr’s art studio! For these sessions, it was decided to divide the students into two clear divisions, for logistical reasons, primary and junior. Each division was then subdivided into three, cross-grade groupings composed of students representing each grade in that particular division. During each of these four Fridays, the students rotated to a different art studio which was taught by one teacher and assisted by a Brock preservice student and a secondary visual art student from the local high school. The studios were as follows : Haida art exploration with shape and colour, clay design, plasti-“scenes”, water colour painting, totem pole symmetry designs, and mixed media trees. Each studio project was developed and taught by the classroom teacher and then

delivered to a different group of students during each of the four Fridays. Each week, students literally could not wait for Emily Carr Studio Friday to arrive!

Alongside these Friday afternoons, another studio project was taking place in each of their regular classrooms during the rest of the week. After reading and learning in social studies about Emily Carr's respect and collaboration with the Native peoples of Canada's west coast, the Haida, each class created their own totem pole which reflected their own personal values and moral principals of conduct. These ideas were all generated by the students themselves, which created a keen sense of ownership and pride in their finished poles. Many of the their totem poles stood 2 -3 metres high and incorporated recycled or found materials. As one teacher commented at the end of the project, "The high point for me was the completion of the totem poles. I thought the totems, in their diversity, were spectacular!"

April / May 2007 – Exhibitions : Felt Nature I & II - Showcasing the Art!

Attention to the whole, while noticing component parts, is an important lesson the arts teach (Cornett, 2007. pg. 80). This is not more visible, than in a large exhibition of student art work! In early April, the students and teachers staged one of the biggest shows and celebrations in the history of Glenridge PS. The students, along with their teachers, selected art works which would best express to the community what they had learned and how they now felt, about the artist Emily Carr. The art works were not copies of Emily's style, but art inspired by her words, her writings and her paintings. This focus was clearly visible when walking around Felt Nature, the whole school art exhibition which literally took over the entire school – classrooms, hallways, and stairwells! While noticing the whole, an exciting breath of west coast air and creativity, the individual thought and expression of each student's voice shone through. The name "Felt Nature", was selected by Paulette Alcox, the co-ordinating teacher, and was found in one of Emily's quotes. In it, Emily Carr shared the sense of not only observing nature, seeing it, but of actually being part of it and feeling it underneath one's skin. An appropriate title for a celebration of children's art work inspired by the gifted Canadian icon!

In early May, the time had arrived for Felt Nature II, the exhibition of juried works to be held at Rodman Hall Arts Centre, the community art centre. As guest collaborator, I was invited by the principal and staff of Glenridge to be the one to select the works which were to be part of this smaller, more intimate exhibition. As the gallery space provided for the show was limited, I could select approximately 30 pieces from the roughly 150 which were in the whole-school exhibition. A difficult task lay before me! With the goal of selecting representation from each grade level and each studio project, 35 pieces were selected and hung. Once again, an official opening night reception was held to help celebrate the achievements of the students. A surprise highlight for the students and parents that evening, was to see their child's art work hanging alongside an original Emily Carr piece which was part of the permanent collection of the gallery, and included as part of the Glenridge exhibition! What a coup!

May 2007 – Whole School Field Trip : Emily Carr at the Art Gallery of Ontario

At the end of May, after the two celebrations of student art exhibitions, it was time for the culminating learning experience of the Emily Carr project and Glenridge PS. On May 18, 2007, every student and teacher boarded a bus and headed for Toronto! We

were off to see the real thing! As much as looking at reproductions in a text book or at projections on a screen can give the “impression” of the works completed by artists, it is the viewing of the actual object which carries the highest form of learning for students. Nancy Berry(1998) writes “In schools, facts and concepts are usually presented sequentially, through verbal communication, and in a structured way. In museum/gallery learning, objects form the basis of the less-structured process, which engages the learner’s own interests, ideas and experiences.” The visit to the AGO that day provided complete engagement for all students who attended. Many parents volunteered their time to help supervise groups of students, and they too found the experience of great importance. Many could not believe how the students shared their vast knowledge and enthusiasm of Emily Carr throughout the Carr exhibition. As one teacher shared,” It was an educator’s dream to see their eyes light up when they saw the real works!”

The Emily Carr project at Glenridge PS was just one initiative which through sound planning and cooperation among a staff, administration and community partners, showed the power of teaching using an integrated approach where the arts are at the center of the curriculum map. Through literacy projects and studio experiences, field trips and student exhibitions, the learning which took place occurred on many different levels. Arts integrated experiences are inclusive experiences that invite all students to participate in the learning process. When the arts become a vehicle for learning classroom content, the whole child is involved. Children are immersed intellectually, emotionally, physically, and therefore rigourously, in the learning experience (Lynch, 2007.)

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