

Teachers Reflect on Arts Integration: What is the Value Added?

In late June, after the last day with students, twenty-six classroom teachers, special subject teachers, service providers and administrators gathered to reflect on one part of Hilltown's three-pronged mission: to engage students in a school that uses experiential, hands-on activities, the arts, and interdisciplinary studies to foster critical thinking skills and a joy of learning.



The timing of this community reflection was significant. The school's original Atelierista, Laurel Loomis, retired after 27 years, and the school's only other Atelierista, Joy Kinigstein, retired after 24 years. Our longtime Music & Movement teacher and Choral Director, Marguerite Durant, also announced a career change.



Marguerite Durant, Music & Movement

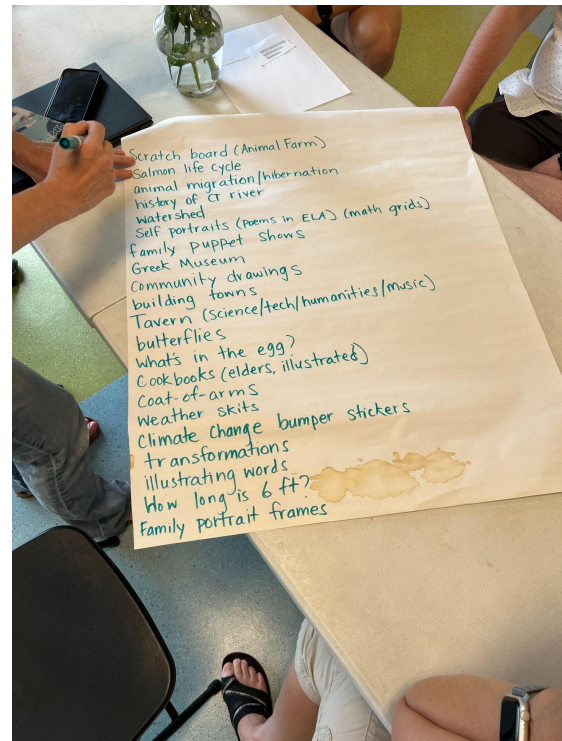


Joy Kingstein, Atelierista



Former directors Dan Klatz and Amy Aaron, Laurel Loomis (Atelierista), Penny Giguere (former Atelier assistant) and Paula Yolles (a Hilltown teacher since the school opened, also retiring after 27 years).

We gathered in the All School space. First, we took time to name all of the integrated arts projects we could think of, large and small, that had taken place in recent memory. In ten minutes, we listed over fifty projects, including cookbooks illustrated with elder buddies, a ballet about the states of matter, collages based on historical photographs of Easthampton mill buildings, and weather reports performed as skits.



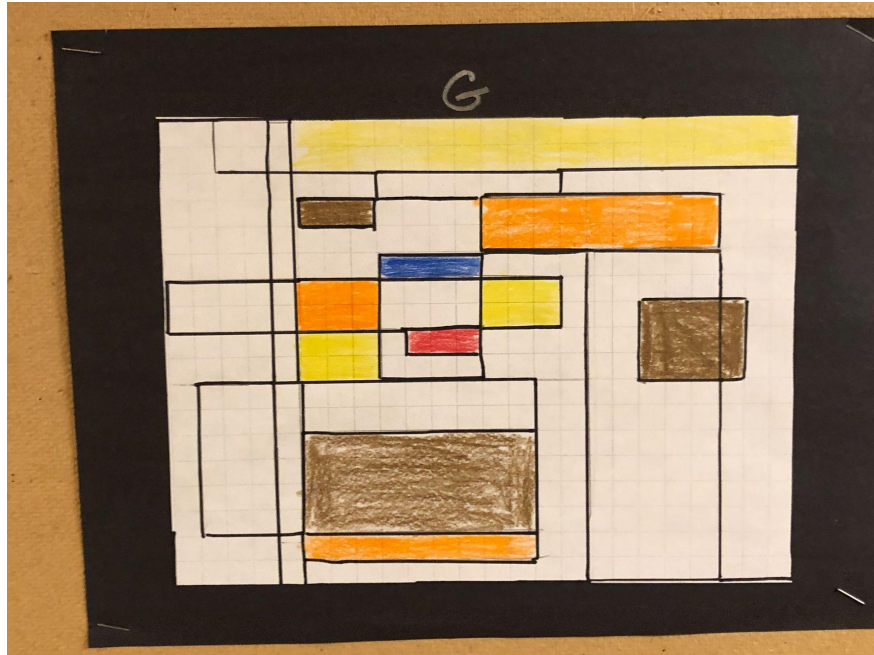
Surrounded by lists of specific projects to anchor our pedagogical discussion, we paused to consider this essential question: **“What is the value added for students, teachers, and community, when a school has a structured commitment to arts integration?”**

The structures that support our commitment to arts integration include an articulated professional expectation that all teachers will contribute to developing original, arts integrated projects; common time for classroom and specialists teachers to plan units of study; professional development related to arts integration; regular venues for sharing arts integrated projects with the broader school community (in the hallways, on the website, and through our weekly all school assembly, to which parents are invited), and of course, our mission statement.



The conversation among colleagues addressed the intellectual and emotional benefits to students, the way integrative pedagogy deepens and enlivens the work of teaching, the way that working on integration projects builds community, and the way integrating the arts supports other parts of our school mission, such as cultivating individual voices. What follows are excerpts from the conversation, speaking to all of the above.

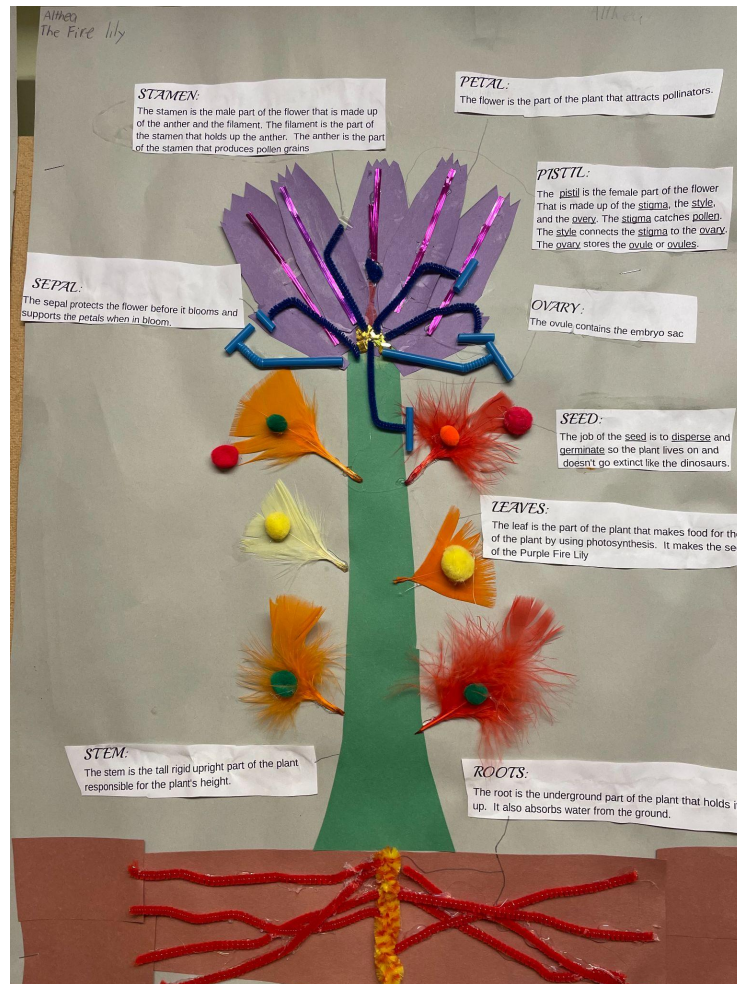
“One of the things that I love best about the school being arts integrated is that it really showcases that everything is completely interrelated. Subjects that we teach are not things that happen in a vacuum. When I teach math, there’s so much art and science in it. Really having that understanding that actually everything is completely interconnected is important.”



“I think that the arts push at the boundaries of things. The arts encourage kids to connect on an emotional level...and the arts access a part of the brain that makes us better problem-solvers, encouraging more thinking outside the box.”

“I think working with the arts gives kids lots of entry points, lots of ways into complexity, and lots of ways to experience the things they are learning.”

One teacher talked about the importance of art-integrated projects as a way to broaden assessment of understanding: “The arts make it possible to assess what students know when they might not participate in a discussion or it might not show up in a writing assignment or on a test. For example, making a collage about the parts of a flower gives students a chance to show what they know in a totally different way, and arts give them time to dig into something in a different way and sit with it for a while.”



Teachers reflected on students' sense of satisfaction in completing a tangible project and feeling pride in making things. One colleague pointed out that making things is a quiet form of class participation, and another colleague pointed out that in many of our arts integrated projects, there is more than one way to participate, opening up the exploration to all kinds of learners.

In terms of deep learning, a veteran teacher shared the following.

“Teaching here for as long as I have, I think this is what the kids remember. They remember the content they learned through integration projects differently, more deeply, and can tell you more about it. I know years down the line, the projects we did in kindergarten and first grade with the salmon life cycle is something they can still tell you all about as Prisms. From dancing it to drawing it, they remember the salmon life cycle in depth.”



“Yes, integration extends learning over time. Something that might have happened momentarily in a classroom gets extended over weeks, and then it gets extended even longer by sharing it in the hallways, and having other people see it.”

“It’s special that integration projects that older students do are visible to younger students, and that builds interest in projects to come.”

“From a teacher’s perspective, being new this year, integration feels like a team effort. It’s not just one or two teachers in their classrooms teaching about sugar; the students listen and learn about sugar in music with Marguerite and do multiple art projects with Laurel. In other places I’ve worked there is a lot of talk about collaboration, but in this school we really make time and space, and the students see us as a team.”



“Adding to the team effort- this year I saw, when we were studying sugar, it was heavy- we studied the slave trade and the work of producing sugar, but then Laurel did a candy wrapper design, and it created balance, so that the directions we took it in went multiple ways.”

“The real love I have for teaching here has to do with the team, because you get so many ideas with so many different brains. It’s exciting and alive and kids feel that. Their passion and excitement to try new things comes from that alive feeling we teachers have in team planning that is translated to them. In community, it has been fun to ask parents to bring their expertise into the conversation...we make the world part of our classrooms and our classrooms part of the world.”



“Most project based studies have the element of choice for students. Students learn that they can express their learning in different ways. There are students who really want to sing, or do music, or have an acting part, or be a part of the visual component, and when we have projects, that really helps with choice.”

“As a teacher going through our two-year cycles [for major studies], knowing this subject has come up in the past, I wonder, what are we going to do this year? Magically, out of the collective, something usually materializes, and that is something that has kept the job interesting and alive for me. It has been a challenge, and sometimes it doesn’t work out as well, and that’s okay, because overall, the experience is positive. Students go deeper into the content and it doesn’t always have to be perfect.”

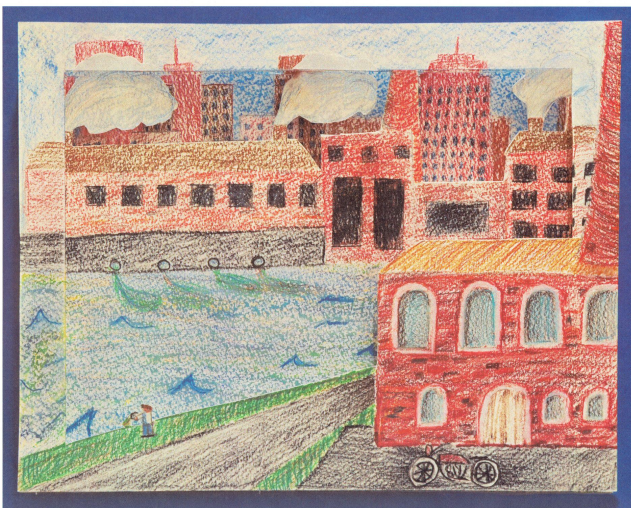
Marguerite added, “I want to say that here, instead of the arts being an auxiliary thing, where teachers say ‘I’m sending my kids to music, have fun’- it feels here that music is valued and validated, and there’s never a question that I have to show students how important it is. It’s part

of the school culture and students accept that, so I can push them a little more. I don't have to work on the buy in piece, it's given to them, and that is really valuable.



The conversation closed with a presentation by Joy, who told a story in which two similar integration projects had much different results, highlighting the expertise and craft that is summoned by teachers engaging in this work.

The project, in both cases, was a three-tiered piece of art. The original project focused on the history of the Connecticut River. Students worked in teams of three to make a panel representing the period of Connecticut River history to which they were assigned. In each group, one student was responsible for the environment, one student was responsible for representing what people were doing with or on the river, and the third student focused on life in the river. Because they were coordinating their work and because it was research-based, students had to keep talking. They talked about the color scheme and the style of art, and they also reasoned through the history of the river: 'No no no, that's not what was going on in the river. Remember, there wasn't a bike path yet, it was a train track...'



This year, Joy tried the three-panel assignment again, with different content and a slightly different structure. This time, students were asked to represent their own imaginary civilizations, developed in social studies class. This task did not lead to the same coordination, communication, and in-depth reasoning. For one thing, they were not matching their work to research, and they were not collaborating on a shared panel. Also, they were constructing their panels months after completing their initial civilization projects in class. These differences had a significant impact on the quality of thought and work. Joy described how the students enjoyed making their panels, but the potential of arts integration was not reached; this is how we learn.

Our guiding question for this conversation was, **“What is the value added for students, teachers, and community, when a school has a structured commitment to arts integration?”**

In addition to the substantive conversation highlighted above, it is notable that planning to integrate has value; engaging in integrated art projects has values; sharing arts integrated processes and products with the community has value, and reflecting on the process also has value. The value added makes a difference to students, teachers, and the community, all at once.

