

Collaborating with Teachers on the "Fringe"

Feature

fringe frinj/ *adjective*

adjective: fringe

1. not part of the mainstream; unconventional, peripheral, or extreme.

Over the past four years at Lakeside High School, we have developed a series of collaborative events that include “fringe teachers,” or those educators that we rarely have the opportunity to collaborate with in the school library. With some creativity, any subject area can be involved in library programming, as libraries have resources on every topic and subject. We want to share two ideas and encourage you to bring in those fringe teachers for library collaboration whenever possible. Your program will benefit, and so will the learners.

The Arkansas Declaration of Learning Collaboration

The first idea we will explore is a new event sponsored by the Arkansas Declaration of Learning program. This is a partnership among the U.S. Department of State, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, and the Arkansas Department of Education. Our school was selected as one of twenty-eight in the state to participate. At a two-and-a-half day training summit at the Crystal Bridges Museum, representatives from each organization gave an overview of the program and assisted us in the creation of dynamic lesson plans that included objects and art from each participating cohort.

Teaching any type of lesson with art is way out of our comfort zone, but being participants in this program challenged us to expand our thinking about using art as a primary source in any type of lesson. We knew this could be a wonderful paradigm shift for our learning community. We decided to invite two art teachers to join us in this collaboration: Mr. Darrell Davis and Mrs. Cathy Pierce. When we described the program and showed the high quality photos of the art objects, they both eagerly agreed!

There were many stakeholders in this collaboration: art teachers, library media specialists, students, administrators, and the partnering organizations. Little did we know that this would begin to change the collaborative culture of our school.

Bringing in Research Skills and Civic Engagement

We decided to use three eighth grade art classes. These learners had just experienced the essential question (EQ) “*Who can be a hero?*” in their English classes. We had hosted a two-day September 11, 2001, collaboration with all eighth graders the previous week, so they were now accustomed to the library being an extension of the classroom.

Artists as Heroes

We decided to build on the English EQ by asking, “*In what ways can artists be heroes?*” We selected five of the pieces provided by the participating organizations: “Untitled” by Ruth Asawa; Tuskegee Airman and Arkansan Milton Crenshaw; Anti-Slavery Medallion; White Bisque Figural Group of Louis XVI and Benjamin Franklin; and American Silver Indian Trade Peace medal. We divided the learners into five groups—one for each object. For three days in the library media center, students researched their object’s history and significance. Groups then briefly presented each object to the class on the second day in the library. This gave a student-led introduction of each object to the learners. The activity also served as their first taste of research in the library as new high school students—how wonderful that this inquiry occurred in an art class! The third day of programming consisted of a gallery style viewing of each object in the library media center.

The U.S. Department of State Diplomatic Reception Rooms provided a database that contained high quality images of each object. We printed and enlarged the images using our color plotter. This created an amazing gallery style experience for our learners.

Civic Engagement

We also wanted to have a civic engagement connection for this program and decided to have the learners create an art piece in the days following the program. Students were given the option of where to donate their art pieces when completed. We allowed students to vote using a Google Form at the end of the gallery walk in the library. This survey was also used to get feedback about the program and information for reflection from the learners.

Student Feedback

We are always amazed at the feedback we get from students. Our learners will often share excellent ideas for the improvement of our programs. The best feedback is when

they reflect on their learning. The following are some highlights from the survey when asked the question, “What will you remember most from this event?”

“The gallery walk and learning about all the history from artwork.”

“How to see the symbolic nature of the pieces”

“I really enjoyed learning about how to make sculptures. I liked being able to observe the pictures, then learn about their background and such. Overall, I think the event was a success, and I really had a lot of fun.”

Future Plans And Improvements

We want to continue encouraging teachers to use art as a primary source in the curriculum. It is an excellent way for learners to access prior knowledge through symbolism and other rich content, and we want students to appreciate art. Objects and art are great opportunities for conversation with learners. There are many occasions to have learners research art, artists, history, and more. As we plan for this project next year, we hope to encourage mathematics and science to get involved.

If help is needed, we will contact our new friends in our state at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. We should all remember that we are never alone. There are museums all around the country that are willing to give assistance.

Expanding our Collaborations

After much success at the junior high level, we decided to extend our collaborative events to the high school. In order for our first collaboration at the high school level to be a success, it was a necessity to go big. The idea for this “big” event came from one of our sophomore English teachers, Heather Slay. In the fall, the tenth grade English classes read Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. This novel takes place in Umofia, a Nigerian village. Using the setting of the novel, the idea evolved into our first collaborative event...Africa Day!

Several stakeholders were involved in the planning of Africa Day: sophomore English teachers, social studies teachers, art teacher and students, local doctor, local musicians, Chartwells (food services), and library media specialists. Often times, we gravitate to the subjects with which we’re most comfortable when collaborating. For example, English and history are a natural fit for collaboration; however, this event allowed unique partnerships to be forged.

Africa Day Collaboration

The day prior to the event, a local doctor was invited to speak to tenth grade students about the culture and traditions of Nigeria, her home country. While reading *Things Fall Apart*, students had been introduced to what life was like for the Igbo, a rural Nigerian people, but this provided students a first hand account.

During the Africa Day collaboration, students were exposed to various learning stations. Being immersed in music, art, dance, and food, students were provided an authentic opportunity to experience life in a Nigerian village. A focus of this event was the importance of art and symbolism in African cultures. Art teacher Jo Hornbeck and art students created tribal masks; these masks were sculpted from terra cotta or low fire white clay, underglaze, raffia, wire, and beads. A senior art student led a discussion, focusing on how the masks were created, what the masks meant symbolically, and why they are worn in African rituals and ceremonies. Drawing from Achebe’s novel, students were asked to examine symbolism in the Igbo culture. Art students also set up a face painting station where students were allowed to choose the color and design, both signifying specific meanings. A gallery walk provided students an opportunity to examine and discuss common motifs in African art. In addition to art, students were exposed to music and food.

During a lunch program, a local musician brought a talking drum, a shekere, a djembe drum, and various other instruments for students to play. Students were actively engaged in creating and exploring rhythms indicative of ones that might be heard during traditional rituals and ceremonies. The final and most successful component of our Africa Day collaboration was our Taste of Africa station. Chartwells prepared African cuisine for students to sample; this was our first collaboration with food services. Since this event, we have partnered with Chartwells several other times and have found that adding food enhances the experience for our students.

Feedback

We use the feedback from our students to determine how to better serve our learning community.

“This event gives students an opportunity to be actively involved in African culture.”—Heather Slay, 10th grade English teacher

“Africa Day was creative and out of the box; it helped students understand the book more.”—Mariah Perrigo, 12th grade student

“The food was exceptional! It was very educational and fun!”—Steve Lowry, 12th grade student

These comments confirmed that students were engaged and found Africa Day to be a valued addition to the 10th grade curriculum.

Future Plans

It is our goal to continue finding innovative ways to collaborate with all members of the learning community. Now that collaborative events have become a staple at the high school level, we will use this foundation to further expand our learning. One way we plan to do this is by inviting our high school's percussion ensemble to participate in Africa Day. This will provide an opportunity for more students to play an active role in this event. Student led stations will be an additional focus in future collaborations. Africa Day has been a continued success at Lakeside and we, as educators and collaborators, will strive to create unique learning experiences for our students.

Conclusion

Collaborative events like these lend themselves to innovation in the curriculum. We are grateful to Lakeside High School Principal, Mr. Darin Landry, for supporting the funding of these important programs. Serendipitously, these events have helped change the culture of our learning community. Please consider tapping into your teaching team's creativity by encouraging them to create a lesson that your learners will never forget. To find out more about our programs, read our *Library Media Tech Talk* blog (librarymediatechtalk.blogspot.com).

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