

# ART ON THE PRAIRIE

BY EDWARD B. FISKE

**T**HE TOPIC of the morning in Cindy Mangers' second-grade classroom was Picasso.

The students took turns reading out loud from a children's biography of the celebrated painter and calculated how old Picasso would be if he were still alive. They looked at poster-sized reproductions from his various periods and voted on where to put each one on a scale running from "realistic" to "abstract." They chuckled at a cartoon poking fun at a Cubist portrait. ("He's breaking me up.")

When a student read that, following the death of his best friend, Picasso "felt alone and sad," Ms. Mangers asked the class, "What color do we talk about when we think sad."

"Blue."

The teacher then led her charges in a discussion of "The Old Guitarist" from Picasso's "blue period" and asked them to talk about what made them sad or happy. Several students mentioned the drowning of a friend last summer, and that afternoon the class wrote poems about sadness and happiness, including one that read:

*I'm sad because my friend died.  
It seems like everybody  
Is going to the sky.*

The lesson on Picasso at the A.B. Newell Elementary School in Grand Island, Nebraska, was remarkable in many ways, starting with the fact that Cindy Mangers managed to keep a classroom full of seven-year olds engrossed in a discussion of a modern painter for nearly an hour. Although the ostensible subject was art, she also brought in language arts and mathematics and introduced complex ideas like abstraction.

The Picasso lesson that day at Newell Elementary is a good example of the kind of teaching being promoted by a well-funded national movement with the ungainly title of Discipline-Based Art Education, or DBAE. Promoted by the J. Paul Getty Trust, the movement, which is sometimes referred to as "comprehensive art education," seeks nothing less than the transformation of visual arts instruction in American schools.

In 1982 the Trust, which operates the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, established what is now known as the Getty Education Institute for the Arts. Its vision for art instruction was laid out in a 1984 report entitled "Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America's Schools." The institute set up a research and development site in Los Angeles to develop the concept, draft curricula, and train teachers and administrators.

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Getty's review of art education, carried out by the RAND Corporation, found that art in most schools was a "marginalized" activity seen as having recreational and therapeutic benefits but contributing little to the cognitive goals of schooling. Teachers at the elementary level concentrated almost exclusively on art creation—getting students to express themselves by making paintings and other artistic products—while high school teachers saw their role as training future artists.

The solution, Getty concluded, lay in establishing the visual arts as a regular academic discipline alongside the usual core subjects of math, language arts, social studies, and the natural sciences. "We decided that if art education ever is to become a meaningful part of the curriculum, its content must be broadened and its requirements made more rigorous," said Leilani Lattin Duke, director of the Institute.

Discipline-based art education thus identifies four "disciplines" within art instruction—art making, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics. "One can create art, perceive and respond to its qualities, understand its place in history and culture, and make reasoned judgments about art and understand the grounds upon which those judgments rest," explained Elliott Eisner, a professor of education and art at Stanford University who has been involved with the movement for more than a decade.

The working assumption was that, as demonstrated in Cindy Mangers' Picasso lesson, each of these four aspects of the visual arts can be taught in a developmentally appropriate manner to children from kindergarten through high school.

Starting in 1987, under a new Regional Institute Grant (RIG) program, Getty set up "laboratories" in Florida, California, Nebraska, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas to refine the theories and build a critical mass of school districts willing to implement the new ideas on a districtwide basis. The six institutes have worked with thousands of teachers and administrators from more than 415 districts in thirteen states. They have secured close to \$15 million dollars to match \$10.4 million from Getty.

The RIGs are consortia of teachers, administrators, schools, districts, universities, museums, foundations and professional organizations. "The operating assumption was that educational change will succeed only when it is undertaken by individuals working collaboratively at all levels within a community committed to change," said Brent Wilson, a professor of art education at Pennsylvania State University who served as chief evaluator of the RIG program from 1988 to 1996.

The regional institutes were given considerable latitude in defining and developing their program—something that is amply evident in one of the most successful of the regional institutes, the project in Nebraska.

**N**EBRASKANS are perhaps best known for their passion for football, and they take pride in the fact that, on home game Saturdays, the University of Nebraska football stadium contains 5 percent of the state's population, thus ranking as its third-biggest "city." The prairie they occupy, once an ocean floor, is mostly flat, which contributes both to a strong sense of place and a mentality that presumes that human beings can see for great dis-

tances. Not surprisingly, when Nebraskans organized themselves to bid for Getty support for arts education, they called their consortium "Prairie Visions."

Prairie Visions is unique among the six regional institutes in that it was organized not by a major university but by the Nebraska Department of Education. Sheila Brown, a music educator who serves as the department's director of visual and performing arts education, built a consortium that included all nine of the state's universities as well as its major museums, art centers, the state arts and humanities council, the state art teachers association and one hundred school districts, both public and private. Several local foundations also supported the work.

The heart of the Prairie Visions model is a three-week summer professional development institute for teams of art and general classroom teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. The institute is led by a faculty of professionals ranging from kindergarten teachers to university faculty members. Participants spend a week working at the Joslyn Museum in Omaha and the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in Lincoln and another week in regional venues. The teams then return to their schools for the final week to work on program planning and curriculum development.

Since the first session in 1988, more than 1,300 teachers and school administrators have gone through the Prairie Vision Summer Institutes, including 270 of the state's art specialists. Graduates come from districts that embrace half of the public school population.

Discipline-based art education in Nebraska takes different forms at the various levels of schooling. In elementary schools, most Institute-trained teachers are generalists who use their new skills not only to teach art in a more sophisticated way but to enhance their teaching of the full range of subjects. At the St. John Lutheran School in Seward, for example, one of twenty-six private schools that are part of the movement, Maxine Fiala, a kindergarten teacher, has rearranged her entire curriculum so as to make effective use of art.

One day recently Mrs. Fiala organized a lesson around roosters. She read the students a book by Eric Carle entitled *Rooster's Off to See the World* and then had them look at representations of roosters by artists from Japan, China, and the United States. Students counted the number of roosters in the painting, and a boy donned a black robe and pretended that he was a Chinese painter stirring ink from an inkwell that the teacher had brought back from a trip to China.

The teacher asked the students to describe the kind of lines used by the various artists—"fat," "curved," "slanted"—and to notice how they drew feathers in different ways. She called attention to the different postures struck by the various roosters and asked the children which one they would adopt when they made their own drawings. "I'll have mine pecking for food," said one student. "Mine will be up in the air saying, 'Cockadoodledo,' so the beak will have to be open," said another. To inspire their own drawings, Mrs. Fiala then produced a cage with a live rooster.

Mrs. Fiala has integrated art into the kindergarten curriculum in numerous other ways. She uses Winslow Homer's "Snap the Whip" to teach the letter "P" and Paul

Klee's "The Goldfish" to teach about wildlife. Each week an art masterpiece becomes the basis for a variety of activities, such as finding the artist's country on a map and observing clothing styles in the paintings of Francisco Goya or Auguste Renoir.

"In my classroom, art is no longer just the 'cutesy' craft projects children do around holidays or a fifteen-minute activity at the end of a story or lesson," said Mrs. Fiala. "I use art to generate joy in learning, develop critical thinking, and help students communicate their feelings. Picasso's masterpiece 'Mother and Child,' for example, is marvelous because it depicts such a beautiful, loving relationship between a mother and child." Sheila Brown, the Prairie Visions director, described such exercises as "a good example of how to integrate art into the rest of the curriculum while maintaining respect for the integrity of the art."

Earlier this year, Mrs. Fiala took photographs of nine gumball machines, conducted a poll of how many children liked each color, did a graph of the results and then had students paint their own gumball machines. When the paintings were done, a student named Eric volunteered, "I know what we can do. Let's cut them all out and glue them together on a big piece of paper." Mrs. Fiala replied, "Oh, like Andy Warhol's '100 Cans.'" "No," said Eric. "I thought of that in my brain." The students' montage now hangs in the hallway next to a reproduction of the Warhol classic.

**A**T THE middle school level discipline-based art education is employed both by subject matter teachers and by art specialists seeking to broaden the range of skills they teach in their studios. One day recently Arlen Meyer, who has taught art at St. John for thirty years, put his sixth-grade students through an exercise in which they analyzed their own acrylic works in progress in relation to the work of great masters.

Students studied their landscape paintings, decided which formal elements were the most important and then picked a reproduction on the wall that shared these characteristics. One student compared his to a Monet because "we use the same pastel colors with not much neutralizing." Another saw similarities with a Rousseau because of "strong blotches of color." Mr. Meyer said that such exercises not only lend credibility to students' work but also "show them that there is a variety of solutions to a problem."

High school teachers have used DBAE principles to enhance their teaching of subjects such as history and social studies. At Columbus High School in Columbus one day recently, a group of eleventh-grade students in an interdisciplinary American Studies course gave a presentation on the 1920s in which they related the work of Georgia O'Keeffe and other artists to cultural phenomena such as jazz, radio and Lindbergh's flight to Paris. "I'm not a talented artist, so I hated it at first," commented Lindsay Berlin, one of the students. "But now I have a sense of why artists drew the way they did, and I feel more comfortable. It all fits together."

Rose Kotwas, who teaches art at Lincoln High School in Lincoln, said that she has used her Prairie Visions teaching

to "show students how to make things based on information, not just abstract models" and to "show how art relates to the workplace." While doing research on the history of perfume bottles, she learned that Rene Latique, a jeweler and glassmaker in turn-of-the-century Paris, and Francisco Cody, a perfumer, were the first entrepreneurs to market bottles designed for a particular scent. Before having her students design their own perfume bottles, she had them establish standards of quality—an exercise that fits into the category of "aesthetics."

Discipline-based art education has also changed the way museums treat youthful visitors. Docents at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery & Sculpture Garden in Lincoln who have received Prairie Visions training have now abandoned traditional lecture tours and instead lead students in critical discussions of the works of art.

Nancy Childs recently took a dozen sixth-grade students to a gallery with contemporary paintings and asked them to "find something that you feel strongly about." One student pointed to a somewhat surrealistic painting by T. L. Solien entitled "Intruders" that, he suggested, "looks like the Wizard of Oz." Ms. Childs engaged the students in a discussion of the various formal elements of the painting—"Is it balanced?"—and asked how it made them feel. "It's scary," volunteered one student. She asked them what they thought it meant and, "Do you think it deserves to be in an art gallery?"

Thus far there is little empirical data on how discipline-based art education has impacted on academic performance in Nebraska, though initial results of a state-sponsored survey are scheduled to be released in March. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence abounds that Nebraska students exposed to discipline-based art instruction are more sophisticated about the visual arts.

Laurie Confer, a docent at the Sheldon Gallery, said she and her colleagues have noticed changes in the school children arriving for museum tours. "They use vocabulary like 'abstract expressionism,' and they certainly feel a lot more at ease than their parents—or even college students—looking at a Motherwell," she commented. Arlen Meyer, the art specialist at St. John, added that "students are arriving at middle school with a better background."

Parents report that the new approach to teaching occasionally affects their vacation plans. When Bill Chadck drove his eighth grade son to Chicago for a Cubs baseball game, he was asked to swing by the Art Institute of Chicago. "Andy specifically wanted to see 'American Gothic,'" he said. "We headed for the Impressionist floor, and he would point to the various paintings and say 'that's a Monet' or 'that's a Matisse.' I thought the Cubs game would be the highlight, but they lost. So it was the art museum."

Cindy Mangers of Newell Elementary tells of receiving a telephone call last summer from a student who had just returned from a trip to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. "The whole family came over during vacation to tell me about it," she said. Ms. Mangers also reports that, when they return from museum trips, her kindergarten students cut out pictures of paintings, create play galleries, and give tours to their stuffed animals.

Observers say that the times are ripe for the discipline-based approach in several ways. George Neubert, the director of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery who says that he was "initially quite skeptical" about Prairie Visions, suggests that the movement benefits from the fact that "technology has raised people's awareness of visual imagery."

Whereas the traditional "product-oriented" approach to art instruction was consistent with child-centered educational approaches of the 1960's and 1970's, the emphasis in the 1990's on academic standards would seem to be more hospitable to the teaching of aesthetics, criticism, and art history. "It's the antithesis of the flower children doing their own thing," said Brent Wilson, an evaluator of the Nebraska program.

Despite such forces working in its favor, the discipline-based art education movement faces serious problems as it seeks to move beyond well-financed pilot projects to more broad-scale implementation.

The first five years of Getty's program succeeded in establishing a grassroots network of individuals, schools, and organizations that fueled a national movement for DBAE. But these programs are costly and, in an era of steady state budgets, it is unclear whether adequate funding will be available to train a sufficient number of teachers and administrators to make this approach normative in American education.

Like other academic reform movements, DBAE faces the problem that old habits die hard. "A lot of people just don't want to change," said Jeff Stern. "They feel threatened if you start teaching art history instead of art production." Advocates also concede that there are legitimate questions to be answered related to preserving the integrity of art. "Art has to remain art," said Mr. Meyer. "You have to teach it as content, not just as enrichment. If you sell art as a hand-aid to social studies, then you trivialize art."

Proponents concede that the DBAE approach is much easier to implement at the elementary school level, where

there is no prescribed curriculum and where inter-disciplinary approaches are more well established, than it is in subject-oriented middle and high schools. It is also tough to implement in large schools. "If a teacher is dealing with 2000 kids and seeing them twice a month, there is no way to make major change," said Mr. Meyer.

Ms. Duke said that discipline-based art education now faces the basic problem that confronts any movement: how to move from the research and development phase to full-scale implementation in schools. "We need to find the strategic pressure points, but we also need to be clear about our message. The business community, for example, does not understand why the arts are important. We need more on the pull side."

In order to demonstrate its relevance to school improvement, Prairie Visions is about to embark on a large-scale assessment project. "Prairie Visions is built on the premise that if teachers come to the Institute and learn, then students will be able to give us back what we teach the teachers," said Sheila Brown. To test this out, the Nebraska State Education Department has mounted a study of Prairie Visions schools and a control group using instruments such as tests of knowledge about art, attitude surveys, and examples of situations in which students were asked to produce art and then criticize it.

Mr. Wilson observed that, while discipline-based art education has undoubtedly demonstrated its power to improve the level and sophistication of teaching about the visual arts per se, it is still struggling to demonstrate the relevance of art to the broad academic goals of school. "The overriding question," he said, "is how to wedge art education into schools where the real agenda is higher test scores."

Mrs. Fiala has no doubts on this score. "It's amazing what kindergarten children can learn when serious artworks are incorporated into their learning," she said. She recalled that one of her students, Ian, recently sat at his kitchen table painting a tree. "Look Mom," he said. "I'm using pointillism like Seurat." □