

# a fine **FACTA**



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# MADD About Town

## Editorial

Bonnie Cohoe



### Inspiring Arts Education

In this in-between time for arts education, this issue of *a fine FACTA* examines some of the people, programs and processes involved in fine arts education.

The people stories are about Gayla Worden, our current president; Bill Hamm, music director at Rosebud School of the Arts; Sean Guist, who is pioneering as a learner in the MFA program at the University of Lethbridge; and Nina White-Bailley, choral director at Bishop Grandin High School, in Calgary. Their stories encourage us in our journeys as arts educators and inspire us to consider new opportunities for personal and professional development.

The program stories concern the Foothills Composite High School/Alberta High School of Fine Arts production of *Les Misérables* in Okotoks, and the arts program at the Leighton Art Centre, Gallery and Museum, which is situated on 80 acres southwest of Calgary.

The first process article describes the new blog created by Fine Arts Council representatives for use by

arts educators. The creators have invested a great deal of their time and careful thought in designing and initiating this website, and we hope you will be able to make good use of it. The more people who use it, the more useful it will be.

The second process article, by Shelley Robinson, describes how effective learning uses cycles for learning between times of engagement and times for integration, reflection and renewal of energy. She weaves together research, implications and suggestions for changes in education for healthier and more effective learning for students.

John Poulsen wrote the article on last fall's conference—those of you who were unable to attend will discover a little of what you missed. Gaye McVean wrote the article on the conference that will take place this fall. Please consider possibilities for presentations at the coming or future conferences. We hope to see you there at this fall's conference, "Designing Inspir[ed] Learning."

*a fine FACTA* is a publication of the Fine Arts Council and is for all arts educators in Alberta and at the same time seeks contributions from arts educators from across the whole province. Stories about people and programs from Fox Lake to Manyberries and from Jasper to Oyen would strengthen and deepen our sense of belonging to a community of creative and caring educators providing exciting and inspiring programs. If a person or program inspires you, please let me know, and I will arrange for an article in an upcoming issue.

# Conference 2011

Gaye McVean, Patrick Tomczyk and Diane O'Rourke

The 2011 Fine Arts Council conference, “Designing Inspir[ed] Learning,” will be held in Calgary, again at the Delta Calgary South hotel. If you attended last year, you will know that the food alone would be enough to get us back to that site. We will offer 42 breakout sessions in music, art, drama and dance that will appeal to specialists as well as generalists who use the arts in their classrooms—this is one of the few hotels in Calgary that can accommodate such a rich conference.

Look for details on the conference in mid-April. Registration will be handled by the Calgary Regional Consortium and will start around that time so that delegates will have plenty of opportunity to take advantage of the generous early-bird rates in place until the end of June.

The committee has found two ideal keynote speakers to address the conference theme, “Designing Inspir[ed] Learning”—Carole Miller and Juliana Saxton. Carole Miller is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. She is the coauthor of *Learning to Teach Drama: A Case Narrative Approach* (2000). Her primary area of research is the relationship of drama to learning across the curriculum. Juliana Saxton is professor emeritus in the Department of Theatre and adjunct professor in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, also at the University of Victoria. Juliana is the coauthor of *Teaching Drama: A Mind of Many Wonders* (1987) and author of *Asking Better Questions* (1994; 2nd ed 2006). Together, Carole and Juliana coauthored *Into the Story: Language in Action Through Drama* (2004). Piloted in classrooms of all levels for more than five years before being published, the text

became the American Alliance for Theatre and Education’s Distinguished Book of 2005. Juliana and Carole’s collaborative research is primarily concerned with creating competent, confident and comfortable classroom educators in drama. They have recently been exploring how learners bring together a multifaceted range of metalanguages through real and fictional conversations of experience. Juliana and Carole also hold adjunct appointments at the University of Sydney, Australia. Each is the recipient of an excellence in teaching award and, between the two, they have taught internationally and published widely.

For entertainment on the evening of the banquet, the committee has engaged Magnolia Buckskin. These four singer/songwriters, Kathy Cook, Natasha Platt, Emily Triggs and Corry Ulan, join forces to create an acoustic quartet of sublime vocals and refreshing original songs that will elevate your soul. Their music is a blend of grassroots, folk and pop. Come and spend an evening with this dynamic group (a couple of whom are teachers, so they understand our world) as they sing, play and kibitz their way through the evening. Between the four of them, they play guitar, washboard, accordion, banjo, six- and twelve-string guitars, bass, drums and harmonica.

Do join us in Calgary for this exciting conference. We will update the Fine Arts Council website with information as it becomes available. We hope you will consider submitting your ideas on how to design inspired learning in our classrooms—go to <http://fac.teachers.ab.ca>, select Conferences and Workshops from the menu on the left, then Annual Fall Conference, and fill out the Call for Presenters form.

## Designing Inspir[ed] Learning

Fine Arts Council Conference

October 27-29, 2011

Delta Calgary South

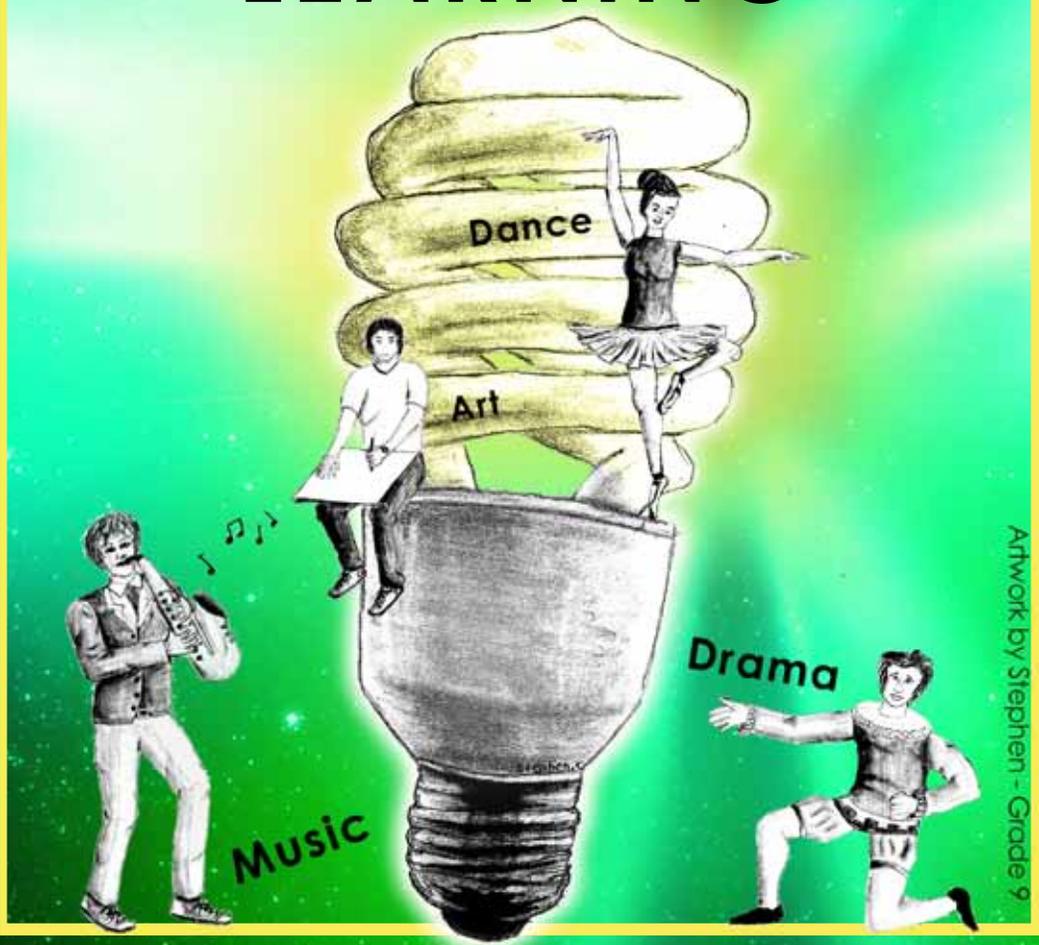
For further information about the conference, please contact  
Irene Naested, conference cochair, at [inaested@mtroyal.ca](mailto:inaested@mtroyal.ca).

*Conference Committee*



FINE ARTS COUNCIL CONFERENCE

# DESIGNING INSPIRED LEARNING



Artwork by Stephen - Grade 9

OCTOBER 27 - 29, 2011 DELTA CALGARY SOUTH, CALGARY AB

[www.fac.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.fac.teachers.ab.ca)

# Conference 2010

John C Poulsen

## A Gush About the 2010 Fine Arts Conference

I have been moved to gush about the 2010 Fine Arts Conference (“An Era to Remember: Timeless Arts,” November 12–14, 2010). In this article, I will gush about many things, but really it boils down to the people. Hallelujah! There are people who think like me. I do not have to constantly defend and explain the value of the arts in general and my art—drama—in particular. I can start my conversations with an understanding that the arts are cool and they are valuable—it may even be that at times the arts are the most important things that humans do.

The conference exceeded my expectations. It helped me re-examine my practice. I feel as though I learned as I have not learned in years. And learning from peers is the best—not just in sessions but even just sitting around chatting. For example, it was great to hear someone tentatively brag about the growth of her program. She knew something special was happening and the rest of us understood and were supportive. It made me feel that all is right in the world. I think that as art practitioners we are on the right track. At the conference I regularly looked around and thought, “Cool! I am surrounded by smart, well-educated, right-minded, kind, organized, competent people. Our world is going to be OK.” My belief in mankind has been restored. To be poetic, I thought “O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in’t!” (*The Tempest* V, i, from [http://](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tempest)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Tempest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tempest)). That I turn to an artist to express myself proves just how important the arts are!

So why specifically was the conference so great? Because you can

1. get away and become immersed,
2. connect with others who share similar ideas,
3. get caught up on the goings-on and
4. get some great professional development.

## Great to Get Away and Become Immersed

The 2010 Fine Arts Council conference was held at the Delta South Lodge, in Calgary. I liked being distant and separated from my workplace. Life at the hotel was marvellous; the food was good and the staff was wonderful—I appreciated that all the workers said hello as I passed; the breakout rooms were close to the main meeting/dining space so everyone was in close proximity for the entire time. I really liked that I lived the experience. From the time I woke up I was in the moment—learning and immersed.

## Great to Connect with Others Who Share Similar Ideas

We lived fine arts education the entire time. Our conversations had shortcuts—we did not have to muddle through openings that tried to establish who we were and set out our beliefs without offending others. I have been at many professional development sessions where it was slightly difficult to find common ground. In answer to the question, “What do you teach?” I have felt

that I have to answer, “Drama—but I think other subjects are fine, too.” It is almost as though I have to apologize for teaching my subject and acknowledge the eminence (sometimes the pre-eminence) of the other—often core—subjects. At this conference the questions, “Where do you teach? What do you teach?” were followed immediately with the implied question, “How are the fine arts in your area?” and “How are the fine arts for you and your kids?” The conversation then inevitably moved toward a favourite subject—the kids. I liked hearing from other teachers about their students’ triumphs and growth, how they learned about the arts and how they have learned about themselves through the arts. I heard about concerts, exhibitions and performances that were both learning experiences and products. I liked meeting new people and finding out what and where they taught. I heard teachers speak effusively about their kids. It was great to experience the excitement.

This year I was impressed with how the conversations at lunch continued what had been experienced in the morning sessions. I was so pleased to hear a

tablemate describe a session that I had attended in the morning, and as I spoke about the session I could feel myself reflecting on the session and relearning the material.

### **Great to Get Caught Up on the Goings-On**

I like chatting with old friends and colleagues. It reminds me that I have a great deal to be thankful for, that we have done some very cool things and that life is good. I talked shop and I liked it. It is always good to find out what is new. I liked hearing the official reports at the annual general meeting and finding out what is happening at the universities, the ATA, Alberta Education, and the FAC executive, and hearing from the art, drama, music and dance representatives.

I am interested in the new curriculum and was eager to hear news of the process and the product. Unfortunately, the news was not great. It seems that the fine arts curriculum may be stalled. It was hard to get a really clear sense of the status of the curriculum, but it





was great to have others to share my frustration at its glacial progress.

## Great Professional Development

Getting professional development (PD) from experts who can teach was a highlight. The medium matched the message. We received not only the content but also demonstrations of how

someone else would teach it and how they would change their teaching style to deliver the content. I believe that many teachers instinctively know how to take on the persona that best facilitates student learning of the material.

**Gail Whiteford**, freelance director and fight choreographer and, recently, teacher, modelled how to start a unit on swordplay by adopting a sharp and flinty-eyed persona. I would argue that a “Don’t you dare step out of line” persona might be ideal before students pick up a sword, and Gail Whiteford does one of the best “don’t step out of line” personas ever. In her steely way she lets students know that horseplay will be dealt with seriously. Swords can seriously injure someone, and she wants her spotless record of no major injuries to remain intact. Students who engage in dangerous or thoughtless behaviour are required to sit out for a cooling-off period of 30 or 40 minutes. After this she has a sense of whether the errant student can rejoin the class.

I had a sense that Gail’s lesson plan structure was based on *learn, do, repeat* and *build*. For example, after laying down the law and showing us the weapons, she taught us the basic pattern of five attack/defensive moves (*learn*). We were then required to work on the pattern (*do*), starting slowly and increasing speed as we become comfortable (*repeat*). Once we knew the basic pattern, she showed us a lock that required us to push our sword pommels together and grab our partner’s wrist. Once we were comfortable doing the lock we were able to grapple. A grapple begins with a lock. Once the lock is solid, the combatants turn 360 degrees and end with a push out. Once we were comfortable doing the

grapple, she encouraged us to move through the five attack/defensive moves, into a lock and finally a grapple (*build*). I was impressed with the solid teaching structure, which was also entertaining.

**Rob Dougherty**, who teaches junior high in Calgary, presented on a process to create a positive classroom milieu that he calls “Equality Within.” Even before the session began, he modelled how to begin a unit on inclusion. He made sure that we were in a tight circle that expanded as latecomers entered. As people arrived Rob welcomed them, asked us to make room and placed a chair in the circle for them. We all sensed the metaphor of inclusion—he was saying that all are welcome and that we will accept all newcomers.

Equality Within is based on the idea that when students walk through the door to the drama room they should leave their history behind them. They are to view themselves and others simply as kids who want to take drama. If they wish to resume their outside-the-drama-room persona when they walk out of the drama room, so be it, but in the drama room they must be concerned for others and not be self-centred.

Rob suggested that in order for the students to take the risks that are necessary for their growth, they must feel safe. He maintains that drama is about the students being vulnerable and that when risk elevates, so must vulnerability. Acceptance and affirmation are necessary for the real work of growing in Junior High. Rob stated that students in drama must be generous and that selfishness gets in the way of growth—selfishness is toxic. Rob demonstrated how he would deal with selfish events such as a student talking while others were performing. He spoke in an impassioned way about the importance of the audience–performer contract, of how the performer was risking herself and how lack of respect from the audience could inhibit the performer’s growth.

Rob’s role-play was very risky. I cannot remember ever having seen a teacher exhibit to peers how students are reprimanded. Rob showed us how to create Equality Within, and was the first to show how to risk and how vulnerable he could be. By the end of the session I had a strong sense that we could do important things.

**Rhonda McCarthy**’s session was titled “Collaborative Playwriting.” As we entered the room, Rhonda, who teaches high school in Calgary, greeted us in a relaxed manner with crisp, knowledgeable, witty remarks, letting us know from the outset that she was

the director. She set a tone that said, “I am ready. Are you?” One of her first statements was, “The arts are intended to inspire.” She asked (maybe even demanded) that we step up and become creative and fearless beings. She indicated that were to write a play as a group, an act she describes as, “... an act of faith, like having a baby—you don’t know what it will be but you will love it.”

She set out what was going to happen in the session and gave us the theoretical background, which leaned heavily on classical Greek theatre. Then she asked us for a concept. We came up with “Bionic Future.” She immediately asked, “Which is more important? Bionic or future?” Nice question to motivate the group. We then had to link the concept to a story that we knew, preferably a nursery rhyme. Rhonda constantly drove us forward. She suggested that we should not give students too much time, since the creative drive seems to live on a bit of an edge. She expounded on the importance of creativity as perhaps the most important drive that humans have.

Rhonda’s lesson plan had a tumbling or spinning feel, much like a dancer spotting as she spins. *Spotting* is when a spinning dancer delays the rotation of her head by focusing on a fixed point in space. The intent is to keep the dancer oriented. Spotting in Rhonda’s session was necessary because creation can have a tendency to spiral out of control. Also, I felt that I became attached to ideas very quickly and needed her help to focus so that I could drop or change my ideas to fit the group and our developing idea. Rhonda kept us oriented by regularly asking us to summarize and reflect. She had a knack for stopping the class at the right moment, asking the right question, giving condensed instruction and then sending us off to work again.

The PD sessions that were led by teachers were tremendous. The teachers set the tone of the workshop before the session began; they started on time; and they

took us on a journey that they had thought through. That is, they knew not only how they were going to begin, but had a solid idea of the middle and end of their session and the product that they were looking for.

Good teachers match content with delivery. They get the class to learn in a cohesive manner that I find brilliant. Their sessions were well-thought-out and the presenters gave out handouts. What more could I ask for?



## Conclusion

It seems that PD has become much more complicated in the last few years, and there is more choice of PD available. There seem to be greater demands on teacher’s time. I have a sense that more teachers are balking at taking another day away from their kids to engage in PD. Yet, we know that PD is important. If you have not attended a Fine Arts Council conference in a while, consider attending next year’s. This conference allowed me to learn in the hands of experts. It also allowed me to see fine teaching. Finally, it offered me connection with like-minded people who bolstered my belief in the arts.

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# *A New Fine Arts Community*

John Ngo

Social media.

It's a phrase that's commonly associated with popular social websites like Facebook and YouTube, but social media have quickly become powerful communication tools in the world of education as well.

You can now join the fine arts community—our dance, drama, art and music representatives have created blogs. This new online space allows you to stay connected with other arts educators 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Check out the blogs, where you can read the latest news and learn about the latest events happening across the province. You can register for workshops, sign up for presentations and find out how you can join the arts community of educators. You can also provide feedback and engage in conversations with your peers.

The art education blog also has other elements:

- Lesson Plans—This section gives you an opportunity to share your own lesson plans and to gather feedback and suggestions from your peers. Collectively, you can generate some great ideas for your own classrooms and create a fun and effective curriculum for your students.
- Books/Websites—A great resource of books and websites that you can use in the classroom. Share any publications that you've found interesting and that you'd like to introduce to the group. If you've

encountered an arts-related website that you think others would enjoy, post it here.

- Workshops—You can find the details for any workshops listed in this section. It's an excellent way to stay on top of events, and you can also ask questions or give feedback here as well.
- Galleries—You can find a list of art galleries here; get more information and see what the latest exhibits are.
- Educators' Artworks—Share your artwork with your peers! Upload pictures of your own artwork here—show off your talents and get feedback from others.

While these tools are all available immediately, the blog is still a work in progress; it will continue to grow into an interactive online community for all arts educators as more members join and contribute. We highly encourage you to take a look and take part—it's an exciting sandbox for us to play in. We look forward to meeting you all online!

## **Blog Websites**

[www.art-fac.blogspot.com](http://www.art-fac.blogspot.com)  
[www.dancefac.blogspot.com](http://www.dancefac.blogspot.com)  
[www.dramafac.blogspot.com](http://www.dramafac.blogspot.com)  
[www.musicedfac.blogspot.com](http://www.musicedfac.blogspot.com)

# Arts-ful Features

## *A Passion for the Arts*

John Ngo

Since taking over as president of the Fine Arts Council in November 2010, Gayla Worden has led a busy life with a number of tasks to juggle. The Fine Arts Council advocates for the importance of fine arts as a curriculum in the Alberta school system.

“We’re there to help teachers by giving them information, providing conferences and networking opportunities, and simply advocating for teachers’ needs,” Gayla says. “It’s our responsibility to keep in touch with the provincial teachers association and focus on the four main strands of arts: music, drama, dance and visual arts.”

After 15 years as an active member of Calgary and Area Regional Fine Arts Council, including five years as treasurer, moving into the role of FAC president was a natural step. Her big mandate now is to push for membership, which affects the amount of grant money the council receives. “A lot of teachers don’t understand the importance of membership and the financial aspect of it,” she says. “The grants allow us to have things like *Fine Facta* and to pay for our conferences and workshops.”

Gayla, currently a full-time music specialist at R J Hawkey Elementary School, in Airdrie, has been teaching for 33 years. Throughout that time, she’s seen the challenges that arts programs face without proper funding.



Gayla Worden

“I have two children who went to excellent schools in the city, but neither of them had music programs,” she says. “Without that, they couldn’t build that love for it.” Instead, her children chose to take part in sports. And while Gayla is happy they had that opportunity, she believes that participation in the arts is an integral part of developing a person’s whole self.

“The arts allow your creativity to flourish, which is important for today’s learners, problem solvers and creative thinkers,” she says. “For some kids, academics can be difficult. Some type of arts can give them that release.”

Gayla references studies that show the importance of art and how the arts facilitate working together, cooperating and building self-confidence. She says the arts give children the feeling of belonging to something, which many of them are missing. “It really develops another part of a child that wouldn’t otherwise be developed,” Gayla says.

As for the future of the FAC, the outlook is positive. “We’re actively working with educators and, hopefully, we’ll host a joint conference in Edmonton next year,” she says.

In the meantime, Gayla will continue advocating for the arts—something she is clearly passionate about.

# Rosebud School of the Arts

John Ngo

Bill Hamm has a master of music degree from the University of Illinois and has been the music director at the Rosebud School of the Arts and Rosebud Theatre since 1989. He conducts choirs, teaches voice and speech classes, and has directed the music for numerous shows, including *Cotton Patch Gospel*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *Godspell* and *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Each year, the Rosebud School of the Arts produces tremendously talented students who excel in various forms of the arts including music, dance and visual arts. As music director at this postsecondary theatre arts school, Bill Hamm has seen it all.

“I had one student who showed a lot of promise as a natural guitar player, and I had the opportunity to teach him,” Bill reminisces. “Needless to say, within a short period of time the student passed the teacher.” That student pursued opportunities to join a band and later returned to declare that everything he had learned about music was thanks to the Rosebud School of the Arts.

Bill first encountered the school when he attended a show performed by students from the school. “I was pursuing a degree in choral conducting and was invited by friends to attend a show at the Rosebud Theatre,” he says. “I had never heard of it, but I was quite taken by the show and asked a lot of questions afterwards.”



Bill Hamm

After Bill completed his master’s degree, a position at the school became available, and he hasn’t looked back since. Music has always been a part of his life—he was hooked on choral music in his younger years, having shown some promise as a conductor. “A person had faith in me and gave me a lot of encouragement, and that’s what helped me get to where I am now,” he says.

It’s no surprise that Bill passes on the same encouragement to his students. But not all his students are children and youth. “We had one 50-year-old electrician drop everything to come to the school of the arts,” Bill says. “His voice

lessons changed how he presented himself, and he’s now out making presentations to executives.”

It’s stories like this that show that the arts have a profound effect on people, Bill says. “At Rosebud, we make better people and better performers. It improves the quality of life—people are entertained by the arts.”

Bill isn’t the only one in the Hamm family who enjoys the arts. He has four children, ranging in age from 11 to 23, who are all involved in the arts and have taken the Rosebud stage; his wife, Renita, is also a singer who has acted in a number of shows.

The passion in arts is what motivates Bill each day, no matter the task at hand. “It’s hard work, but in the end it’s incredibly rewarding.”

# *Sean Guist: A Modern Arts Education Pioneer*

John Ngo

Self-described as “a bit of a guinea pig,” Sean Guist is following his dream by becoming the first master of fine arts candidate to pursue directing at the University of Lethbridge. The 25-year-old from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, has always had a passion for the arts and is taking full advantage of the opportunity before him. “It’s exciting because I’m able to pursue my own interests and tailor the program to my own needs,” Sean says. “It’s so new, but I hope I can pave the way for future students.”

The program is in its second year at the U of L and accepts one student per year. The first MFA candidate is currently pursuing design. Taking courses that include directing, theory and creation, Sean is taking any opportunity he can to put his skills to work. Directing is something he’s always gravitated toward. “I like to make creative choices and guide the production from start to finish, putting my own stamp on the show,” he says.



*Sean Guist*

He’s always been involved in the arts, including music, theatre and dance. Through elementary school, Sean played in bands and sang in the choir, but it was in high school when he began to solely focus on theatre. “I had amazing drama teachers who constantly challenged me and encouraged me to discover my own voice as an artist,” he says. “I am truly grateful for that experience—without that I would not be pursuing my MFA right now.”

Sean believes strongly in the value of arts as an important part of education. He says that studying the arts facilitates a way for students to open up. “Embracing creativity and discovering your own skill set are crucial,” Sean says. “Whether that’s applied to

your own continued education, to the job market or to your own development as a contributing member of society.”

The MFA program at the U of L has a bright future, Sean says. “I see this program constantly evol-

## Arts-ful Features

ing or changing as each MFA candidate brings their own skills, creative outputs and goals,” he says.

As for his own future, Sean has high ambitions, particularly as an educator. “I’d love to work professionally or semiprofessionally, and I’m very interested in the educational component as well,” he says. “But before I actively pursue an educational position, I want to make sure I have real-world experience that I can share with students.”

With the skills he learns in this program, it’s a dream Sean hopes he’ll soon fulfill.

*Sean Guist is an MFA candidate in directing and performance creation at the University Lethbridge. He holds a BFA in performance from the U of L as well. Guist has acted, designed, directed, created and produced shows at the U of L, independently and on the Fringe Festival circuit. His research is focused in queer theatre, physical theatre, directing for theatre and opera, and synthesizing multiple aspects of performance in new works.*

# Show Choir

John Ngo

One of television's hottest TV shows, *Glee*, has put a bright spotlight on show choirs recently. But one Calgary high school has been training world-class show choir students for almost 30 years.

"We've received numerous awards internationally and are invited each year to participate in two distinguished competitions—the Heritage Festival and the Canadian National Competitions," says Nina White Baillie, choral program director at Bishop Grandin High School. "It's an incredible honour and a true sign of accomplishment."

Since 1982, the Bishop Grandin choral program has been a leader in music education, training an average of 100 singers and dancers each year. This year, there are 142 students in the program.

As seen on *Glee*, show choir combines vocal and dance performance through an artistic exploration of show repertoire. The cast performs a wide variety of music, including classical, sacred, jazz, world, Broadway and pop.

"The [Bishop Grandin] choirs compete nationally with great success and stage several performances throughout the school year in schools and churches and at corporate functions," Nina says.

She says the program gives the students the ultimate music experience by providing a supportive and positive framework in which to sing, dance, perform, compete and tour. "In the choir room, helping students build strong friendships and instilling confidence and the importance of team work are fundamental," Nina says. "We provide students with excellent leadership, coaching and peer support opportunities and create a well-rounded learning experience for them."



Nina White Baillie

Having grown up in a musical family going back several generations, Nina says music is part of the fabric of her family. As for her association with Bishop Grandin, she says there's a lot of history there as well. "I was fortunate to have been a choir and band student at Bishop Grandin myself, so I was thrilled to have an opportunity to teach at my alma mater," Nina says.

Nina says the explosive popularity of *Glee* in mainstream media has resulted in students becoming more willing to join the choir but, as witnessed by the consistent membership numbers and awards, the

choral program at Bishop Grandin has always played a large role at the school. "I hope that my students continue to be creative in and enthusiastic about the arts," Nina says. "I hope they will share the teamwork and leadership skills that they have learned in the choir with the greater Calgary community."

As for show choir in Calgary in general, Nina believes the future looks bright. We're sure her students would agree.

*Nina White Baillie began working with the Calgary Catholic School District in 1987 and has taught almost exclusively at Bishop Grandin as a choral director and religious studies teacher. She received undergraduate degrees in music and education from the University of Calgary, studied church music and liturgy at St Joseph's College in Indiana, and completed a master of education from the University of Portland. With her school's strong reputation for excellence, Nina White Baillie feels blessed to be able to teach at Bishop Grandin and never tires of working with creative, enthusiastic, talented young performers.*

# *Les Misérables*

Caroline Orton, James Keary and Nicole Hounjet

## Main Stage Performing Arts Program Encourages Students to Move Beyond Barricades Toward Success

Nothing less than a professional-calibre performance was expected from students in Foothills Composite High School/Alberta High School of Fine Arts' (FCHS/ASHFA) production of *Les Misérables*. Students and staff directors had been preparing, even before the

start of the school year, for the enormous undertaking. *Les Misérables* was one of the crowning achievements of Main Stage—only a handful of high school programs are capable of producing this epic and powerful musical, which ran from February 4 to 19, 2011.

This blockbuster show is based on Victor Hugo's classic novel about ex-convict Jean Valjean. He attempts to start a new life amid the tumult of revolutionary France, yet is relentlessly pursued by policeman Javert. This story is one of the most powerful and exciting ever published; *Les Misérables* has been a timeless classic since it was penned in 1862. Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's brilliant stage adaptation, in collaboration with Herbert Kretzmer, has caught the



## Arts-ful Features

essence of Hugo's work precisely. The musical is now more accessible to modern audiences in the school version, which is available exclusively through Music Theatre International. *Les Mis* showcases a Tony-award-winning score, including the songs "I Dreamed a Dream," "Castle on a Cloud," "One Day More," "Master of the House" and "Bring him Home."

The strenuous preparation and rehearsal schedule demanded that the students especially prepare before classes began each day. Musicians and actors had 32 pieces of music to master before opening in February. Music director Nicole Hounjet held orchestral auditions last June, and the directing team held cast auditions prior to the beginning of school in September. When asked why the FCHS/AHSFA directors chose *Les Misérables*, their response was unanimous. "Few high schools would ever attempt this beautiful but demanding musical. We feel that the vocal and dramatic training these Main Stage students have been given in the past couple of years confirms our belief that if there was any group of individuals who could pull it off, it would be this year's crew!"

No pressure there! But the performers were truly up for the challenge. Hounjet says "This is perhaps one of the most perplexing scores to interpret because it requires such sensitivity and sophistication in terms of musicality. I am so impressed with the student musicians who are so eager to meet this challenge." The show was demanding musically and dramatically. Artistic and technical director James Keary required that students go beyond the performance to immerse themselves in the lives of the characters. The directors' decision to perform *Les Mis* was due in part to its universal themes reflecting the frailty of human nature and personal life choices. Keary was initially apprehensive about the show's somewhat provocative content; however, it is reflective of the era and the period's prejudices toward various social classes. Despite those cautions, the show's universal message is most worthy to deliver. Keary and his cast strove to impart Hugo's strong message of the need for mercy and forgiveness—lessons that we all can learn. As lyrically stated in the show, we can all "remember the truth that once was spoken: to love another person is to see the face of God."

The collaboration necessary to deliver the show's philosophically challenging message involved tremendous day-to-day effort. Technical theatre students, 23 in all, had diligently been working on production elements of the show, including costume and set design, theatrical makeup, and lighting. Under the guidance of



choreography director Kelly van Sluys and music director Nicole Hounjet, the talented performers learned the demanding vocal score and movement pieces.

On a school basis, a major portion of FCHS/AHSFA students are exposed to Main Stage productions through roles as performers or staging assistants, or as fans. Teachers outside the program also donate considerable time with supervision and production support. Main Stage promotes the concepts of leadership, accountability and confidence building, and develops strong communication and time management skills. Main Stagers must make a considerable commitment while meeting all of their curricular requirements. This extra investment pays off in large ways. There are the obvious ones, such as students consistently delivering quality productions and, for some, preparing to pursue careers in professional theatre. Yet, Main Stage students also benefit outside the theatre walls. Employers and postsecondary education institutions agree that the life skills acquired in Main Stage are extremely desirable.

The show was a most proud achievement of FCHS/AHSFA, and students will surely "hear the people sing" of their accomplishment for many years to come.

*A version of this article first appeared in the Okotoks Western Wheel on December 15, 2010, and, with permission, on the Foothills Composite High School/Alberta High School of Fine Arts website on December 16. It has been amended by Kelly Van Sluys and is reproduced here with permission. Minor changes have been made to conform to ATA style.*

# At the Leighton Centre

Barbara Ivens

*Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.*  
—Rachel Carson

*Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.*  
—Pablo Picasso

The Leighton Centre is a special place. I have been bringing children to visit, explore, look and create for many years and I am still amazed by the way this special place connects with children.

I see wonder and curiosity in the eyes of a child looking at a pair of antlers. What are they? Where did they come from? I see young children listening to nature—the sweep of wind through prairie grass, the insistent cry of a magpie or the far-off yip of a coyote—city kids enthralled by the process of trying to identify what they are hearing. Playing outside is an adventure of running, hiding and imagining that is independent from the teacher’s directions.

To contemplate the natural world from the Leighton Centre is to begin a process of seeing and creating.



Children, who often have preconceived notions of what art is and don’t often think they can make art, are surprised and delighted to discover that they can draw. Simple tools and lessons—pencil and paper, along with some beginning instruction around line, shape and shading—are eagerly applied, and landscape sketches and figure drawings emerge. Later in the day, an art project that introduces another medium, like sculpture, is offered.

All of this in one day! The time is too short, and on the bus ride home there are many requests for another day at the Leighton Centre. This special place gives children a starting point to contemplate the natural world and begin their journey of self-expression.

*Nature—the sublime, the harsh, and the beautiful—offers something that the street or gated community or computer game cannot. Nature presents the young with something so much greater than they are; it offers an environment where they can easily contemplate infinity and eternity.*  
—Richard Louv

Books that have shaped my understanding and support these views are offered for further reading: *Last Child in the Woods*, by Richard Louv (Algonquin Books 2005); *The Geography of Childhood*, by Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble (Beacon 1994); and *The Practice of the Wild*, by Gary Snyder (North Point 1990).

*This article has been reprinted with permission from the Leighton Centre newsletter. Minor changes have been made to conform to ATA style.*



# *Finding the Experience in Learning: Creating Space for the Ebb and Flow of Student Engagement*

Shelley Robinson

*It is the function of the educator to examine deeply his own thoughts and feelings and to put aside those values which have given him security and comfort, for only then can he help his students to be self-aware and to understand their own urges and fears.*

—Krishnamurti 1953, 38

## **Some Trends and an Essential Question**

Recently, in the educational institutions across our province, there has been considerable interest in 1) defining, 2) interpreting, 3) implementing, 4) measuring and 5) further developing promising practice (all reciprocally) around the concept of student engagement (Alberta Education 2010b; Willms, Friesen and Milton 2009).<sup>1</sup> I find it refreshing that the Engaging Minds Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)

Project recently and humbly concluded that “we don’t really understand what student engagement means yet ... [and that it is] an emerging concept [that] we need to work on together” (Parsons et al 2011). This response should not be a surprising

reaction from educators as some schools grapple with a Tell Them from Me survey snapshot of students in Alberta who are being compared to relatively low national norms responding in the positive to whether they are “interested and motivated in their learning” (the Grade 7–9 national average is 34 per cent) (Learning Bar 2010).

Student engagement is commonly strategized in classrooms as a series of enjoyable and stimulating



<sup>1</sup> In addition to the cited works, the author refers to research conducted by the Rocky View School Division No 41 in 2003–2006, as part of AISI Cycle 2, on learner engagement.

intellectually targeted learning activities with some attention paid to the affective learning domain, especially in light of educational research that considers the whole child and the various learning dispositions, as well as brain-based research (Gadsden 2008; Gardner 1993; Gregory 2005; Jensen 2006; Gregory and Parry 2003; Sousa 2006; Wolfe 2001). The drive for educators continues to focus on higher-order thinking skills and problem solving (Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Puccio and Murdock 2001; Sousa 2006), partly because this type of learning is measurable in terms of achievement. Unfortunately, this type of stimulating cognitive and even metacognitive engagement (Fogarty 1994; Foster et al 2002) does not always report well when students rate their level of student engagement. Adequate attention is not always paid to engaging pedagogy that balances all of the learning domains (cognitive, affective, conative-motivational, physical and spiritual) (Riggs 1998; Robinson 2009) in order to create a fully engaging learning experience.

It can be perplexing that despite our “promising practices” (Robinson 2008), we do not always have high positive statistics about student engagement. It draws attention to the possibility that when looking at the desired educational experience of our students, we might not be able to focus simply on the cognitive learning domain without making it integrally connected to other learning domains (Covey 2004; Goleman 1995; Lampert 2006; Robinson 2009). In other words, to be truly engaged we must be in touch with our minds, hearts, bodies and souls during and surrounding the learning experience. By doing so, the progressive educational language of “timeless learning” will need to enter our educational lexicon with inspiring words such as “holistic/integrative; embodied; connected; soulful; transformative; flow[ing]; participatory; nondualistic; mysterious; and immeasurable” (Miller 2006, 5–12). Perhaps then, we can reconsider “authentic engagement” (Schlechty 2002) with this essential question in mind: What does the optimal learning experience need to be in order for students to *know* that they are engaged as whole learners in enjoyable, purposeful and satisfying ways?

## The Ebb and Flow of Learner Engagement

First and foremost, students need to be mindful, or truly present, in the learning experience, as this

contributes to the students’ identification and appreciation of the learning experience (Gunaratana 2002; Miller 2006). Being mindful requires that students *live the learning* or the experience of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 1996; Belitz and Lundstrom 1998). Being reflective is different from being mindful, because it requires students to step out of this “pure experience” (Gunaratana 2002) and “decenter” (Robinson 2009) their thinking (during or after the experience) in any of the following ways: “meta-cognitively, meta-conatively, meta-affectively, meta-kinesthetically, and meta-spiritually” (Robinson 2009). Doing so is yet another way to deepen and broaden the learning experience. Both mindful and reflective learning require creative uses of time and space.

When we want learning to be rigorously and richly engaging, we intrinsically know that creativity is a pivotal part of this experience (Sousa 2006). However, to be truly creative, there needs to be a rhythm to learning that is facilitated by teachers within the course of a school day, week, month and year where students regularly experience two contrasting states: 1) mindful rejuv-engagement (ebb); and 2) engagement (flow). If neither the ebb nor flow of learning is experienced, it becomes very difficult for students to adequately digest their learning experiences (Robinson 2009). When students are helped by teachers to mindfully experience the ebb and flow in their own learning in multiple learning domains and through various learning dispositions, real inspired learning has room to take place. I have discovered that I am in good company as a student and writer, in that where I am afforded the time to experience both creative on-task and off-task time in all of the learning domains, I am also most inspired; and as a result, this is where my creative participation, output and self-reflection are greatest (Robinson 2009).

How do we teach students to appreciate the natural ebb and flow of learning?

Teachers often facilitate the pace of their school programs with input from their students. However, when engagement is overly attached to achievement and productivity, it has been my observation that there becomes a frenetic effort to perform instead of teaching students how to *be* in the ebb and flow of learning engagement. Students and teachers sometimes experience “initiative fatigue” (Reeves 2009) that might explain some of the staff attrition<sup>2</sup> and the higher-than-desirable school dropout rate in Alberta (Alberta

Education 2006, 2010a). We need to show students how to be present and restful in learning, just as we need to show them how to be active and engaged in their learning. The creative “slow-hunch” then has a chance to develop in the mindful classroom and, as well, “collide with other ideas” (Johnson 2010) in the active classroom. Fine arts programs often model this type of creative process (Fineberg 2004). Both aspects of the ebb and flow of student engagement are an essential part of a positive learning experience.

## Living the Day in the Life of a Student: Conclusion

I imagine that a radical rethinking of our practice would occur if we had to walk a day in our students’ moccasins from morning homeroom period through each class period (with short breaks in between), concluded by the end-of-day homeroom period, and followed by some rigorous extracurricular programs (in and out of school), and/or work, and/or family responsibilities (Brooks 2011). Although there are pockets of innovative teaching and learning happening in our schools, I still believe that the confines of some of our academic systems in Alberta (ranging from traditional to contemporary organization and practice) would disable me—and others (Brooks 2011) from *experiencing* learning optimally. Now that I know what I know about myself as a learner and about the range of possibilities for educators in the field when provided the creative space to revitalize programs and think outside of our educational “brick (facilities), time (schedule) and mind (paradigm) boxes,”<sup>3</sup> I believe that we need to think about *school* differently if student engagement is truly what we are after. What is not good enough for us, as revisiting student educators in our provincial classrooms, is not good enough for our students (Brooks 2011).

A truly mindful, engaging and reflective practice in a system that supports it is a healthier practice for both teachers and students (Miller 2006). A healthier

practice encourages more positive relationships (Chopra 2009). As a result, students remember these quality experiences and the value they placed on how they *felt* about these experiences. In the end, they might even report on these experiences so that we can measure them. However, the “essence” of learning (Aoki 2005) can sometimes be fleeting, intangible and immeasurable. Perhaps we need to trust our own “integral inquiry” (Miller 2006) as educators to know that positive learning experiences happened in our schools today.

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2 Information obtained from discussion with Dr Garry McKinnon in 2010, referring to Alberta Education Sector Work Force Planning research conducted from 1996 to 2002.

3 Personal conversation with Joe Frank, superintendent of the Westmount Charter School, Calgary, Alberta, February 25, 2011.

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# Submitting to *A Fine FACTA*

Add the goal of being published to your teacher professional growth plan and submit something to *A Fine FACTA*! Submissions may include the following:

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- Student artwork

Please include a short (three- to five-sentence) biography and your address so that a copy of the issue in which your work appears can be sent to you.

Submit signed permission forms for student work or photographs of students.

Send submissions to Bonnie Cohoe, 24 Signature Place SW, Calgary, AB T3H 3A1; e-mail [b.cohoe@calgarywaldorf.org](mailto:b.cohoe@calgarywaldorf.org).

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## *Permission to Print Photograph/Student Work*

Your child has submitted a piece of work or appears in a photograph that we would like to print in the next issue of *A Fine FACTA*. *A Fine FACTA* is a journal that goes to teachers across Alberta who are members of the Fine Arts Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

By signing below, I give permission for my child's work or photograph to be considered for publication in an upcoming issue of *A Fine FACTA*. This permission form will be forwarded to the journal editor.

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### Notes to teachers:

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