

**Ripples of curriculum:
ideas through art for
Mosaic 2007- developing
critical thinking and
other graduate outcomes
through a large project**

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“Think of education as a garden where questions grow.”

(Anna Devere Smith, 2005)

What is thinking? In one way it can be thought of as ripples that emanate from some metaphorical stone thrown into the pool of the mind. It is the job of the educator to toss those metaphorical stones - and then to draw the student's attention to the ripples, the ramifications, effects, permutations that they engender. The great challenge facing the educator is not only to help the student trace the ripple patterns out from the source as they impact thinking, development, careers and cultures, but also to enable the student to trace the patterns back from the edges of current changes to the historical sources, the original thoughts, the great works of art that started the ripples in the first place. For it is this ability to range across the past and present that marks the truly aware critical thinker.

Widening horizons, expanding minds, training minds to think critically & eyes to see critically, these are some of the goals of **Mosaic 2007: Ideas Through Art**. The Mosaic event has become a tradition at Sharjah Colleges, and an integrated part of curriculum delivery. All content areas, all faculty and all students (as well as support staff) spend months in preparation for an interactive display of artifacts and activities that are usually on show in the Sharjah Colleges Sports Complex over a period of several days in April or May. The general public and students from various educational institutions around the UAE are invited to attend, and feedback in response to the event has consistently been enthusiastic. Details about Mosaic are on the College website (Mosaic 2007).

Integration of curriculum goals and graduate outcomes necessitates innovation if students are themselves to become innovators; how else will they recognize innovation if they do not see it in action in their classrooms, in the actions of their teachers, and the culture of their college? Mosaic exemplifies this process; it provides everyone who attends with the opportunity to know their world better and learn more about themselves in relation to that world.

A brief overview of Mosaic 2007

“The beauty is in the beholding, not in the beheld.”

(Lane, quoted in Kernan 2000 :224)

This year's Mosaic event, the fifth so far, followed the same basic pattern as those of previous years: a cross-campus, inter-disciplinary exploration of information and activity (research and creativity) that enables teachers and students to work together to create a wide range of educational artifacts that can not only be used to enrich existing curriculum but can also be presented to the public and special guests during the days of the Mosaic event.

This year's theme, Ideas Through Art, though daunting in scope, offered opportunities for exploration that could be adapted to any field of study at any level within the colleges, from Diploma to Bachelor's Degree, from Health Sciences to Engineering. Each program area was responsible for a particular theme or pavilion and actively explored and reported on connections between, for example, the art of business/the

business of art (in the case of the Business Faculty), Children's Literature and Classical Arabic Literature (in the Faculty of Education), or posters focusing on famous artists or famous schools of art (in the case of Interior Design students and Foundations students).

The final goal of these many activities was to produce a true 'mosaic' focused on the theme: students and visitors were able to see multiple reflections of the theme in various parts of the colleges through the lenses of various academic disciplines. This multi-faceted reflection of a given theme enables students to integrate their own content-related core schema to the theme under consideration, and at the same time appreciate the way other disciplines approach and integrate the theme. The overall effect of this process is exposure to aspects of literacy, and media literacy in particular, on a grand scale. As the MILE guide puts it, literacy can be viewed as:

...the integration of a knowledge base (e.g. a core subject) and the appropriate cognitive and technical skills, that, when acquired, enable an individual to function effectively in a specific context. (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2004)

Mosaic Outcomes and Activities

A brief look at some of the activities associated with the Mosaic event will illustrate the wide range of learning experiences undertaken. This review is organized around some of the eight graduate outcomes which HCT expects students to attain.

GO 1: Communications & Information Literacy

Mosaic activities reflect exploration and increasing competence in mastering this outcome. Specifically, students were engaged in writing essays, reports and poems, creating posters and weblogs (blogs), designing websites and producing videos, reciting poetry, giving presentations, recording interviews, and other activities. For example, as the next article (by Heather Raymond) explains, the Diploma Foundations students and teachers created a website exploring four themes: art, music, theatre and buildings. Their site includes a sequence of tasks and comprehension question revolving around the four themes. When asked about the student response to the site, one of the teachers involved remarked:

The main aims were teamwork, independent work and meeting deadlines, all of which most of them have shown real progress with. They've been giving presentations too, which has helped their spoken confidence. They also incorporate math and computers, which helps the students to stop seeing the three subjects in isolation, and as I said we've got some great displays in H-Block and around the classrooms.
(personal communication, Robert Miles 2007)

Another approach to developing GO 1 was undertaken by the Communication Technology students who produced a video about the Mosaic theme & event. This was partly documentary in style and included interviews with a number of different people at the college, not all of them teachers or artists. They also filmed the activities and

projects that happened on campus, the workshops on pottery, quilt making, etc. Their instructor, in response to questions about the project, said:

In harmony with our department philosophy - which places a great deal of emphasis on the integration of theory and practice on the one hand, and in-class learning and events around the college and in the community on the other hand - what I was pursuing with these projects was an attempt to bring together the buzz of this year's Mosaic with the documentary film-making component of our class. We split the class into four teams, each responsible for covering a few events. I think the girls have demonstrated a high level of professionalism and enthusiasm, and they have managed to create impressive results in a very short time. (personal communication, Shahin Yazdani 2007)

In another approach, the Health Science students were engaged in an ongoing study of Music, its effects on individuals and on cultures - particularly within their own Emirati culture - culminating in a research report and series of posters. Health Science students also attended a presentation given by Dr. Marcelo G. Lima, a visiting Brazilian artist and lecturer. Their instructor, when asked about the event, said:

He ended by emphasizing the key role the imagination plays, not only in art but also in science. With reference to Leonardo da Vinci, he showed how the skills fostered through the arts - flexibility, ability to change one's mind, adapting to reality and learning how reality functions - are all capacities necessary for a scientist. He used a quote we had already discussed earlier in the week, one from Einstein: "Creativity is more important than knowledge". It was this use of the imagination that distinguished Einstein from his colleagues and led to his discovery of the theory of relativity. (personal communication, Caroline Evans 2007)

GO 2: Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving & Interdisciplinary Exploration

This aspect of Mosaic probably bears the richest educational fruit: multiple disciplines focusing on a broadly ranging theme and producing a wide variety of 'artifacts' to reflect and communicate what students have discovered as they explore the material available to them online, in the ILC, and in the larger community. One example, of many, was the research undertaken by Communication Technology students into the relationship between Numbers & Art. It is well-known that students are often attracted to the arts because they find the 'harder' sciences (and especially the math involved) too daunting. How surprised these students were when informed that their research project would be about numbers. "But artists don't use numbers," was one student's rather naïve retort. What a revelation it was then to explore the hallowed halls of the Golden Section, Phi, Fibonacci numbers and the new, non-Euclidean geometry of fractals. (see Patrzalek (no date)). How easy it became for the students to accept that photography (F-stops and exposure times), composition (from Kit Kat logos to credit card proportions) and even computers (binary code of 0s and 1s) were all implicitly connected to the sometimes hidden world of numbers. How surprised they were to discover the relationships (real or imagined) between the number Phi and the Great Pyramid of Gizeh, or the Parthenon, and the Golden Sections in the face of the Mona Lisa. As one student concluded at the end of her research project:

In brief, I have to admit that my view has changed. In the past I believed that mathematics had nothing to do with art, maybe this was one of the reasons why I chose to be in this program. But now after the struggle that I went through to write this report, I must persuade myself that numbers do have a relation with art. Great scientists and artists like Leonardo da Vinci proved that, so who am I to argue? (Mohammed 2007)

Sharjah Colleges Interior Design program students were involved in the rather daunting task of cutting and finishing the enormous Styrofoam facades that are such an integral part of the visuals on the Mosaic site. Anyone entering the main Mosaic pavilion area will know how impressive the facades have been in the past and were again this year. These students recreated the facades of the British Museum, the Louvre, the Cairo Museum of Antiquities and many other global cultural landmarks. In the centre of the Sports Complex a complete facsimile of the Al Aqsa Mosque graced the event and housed within it a collection of classical and modern Arabic calligraphy. According to their teacher, at the beginning the students were very surprised at the sizes of the facades needed. But once they broke the work into smaller chunks, then they were able to be in control of this massive undertaking. These chunks, or steps, included:

1. Visualising and designing the facades;
2. Drawing the outlines;
3. Cutting and shaping; (probably it was the first time for them to use metal files and sandpaper; nevertheless they approached this task with professionalism - and the outcome was great);
4. Gluing the parts together;
5. Mixing the right colors and rendering;
6. Finishing up by adding different materials to achieve special effects.

Their teacher commented that:

The students were very proud of what they did, so should we be. The whole thing had the added bonus of developing their teamworking skills. As one student said: "this project brought the class together and taught us how to work in teams to achieve certain goals." (personal communication, Salwa Smith 2007)

GO 3 Global Awareness

A short stroll down the main hallway at the Women's College was enough to illustrate the enormous number of international connections this year's topic engendered. Enormous wall posters were created by Susan De Guzman to illustrate the various pavilions and themes that were on display at the actual event: the Louvre pyramid, British Museum, Mona Lisa, Dome of the Rock, Globe Theatre, Egyptian Museum, Techno Art, World of Music, Fashion, Far Eastern Art, Cinema, & Photography.

Each one of these themes/pavilions could merit a Mosaic event of its own; the scope of this year's event was truly global. Foundations students produced posters focusing on artists (Leonardo Da Vinci, Salvador Dali, Claude Monet), events (the Great Fire of London, the French Revolution, World War Two), movements in art (Impressionism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism) and the artworks themselves (Water Lilies, The Madonna of the Rocks, Sleep).

GO 5: Self Management & Lifelong Learning

Much of the material created for the event was made by loosely affiliated teams of teachers and students. The wide range of communication skills involved - from delivering instructions to critiquing work executed - no doubt fostered positive attitudes to lifelong learning, while the discipline of sustaining such a creative endeavour over the weeks and months leading up to the event involved management of self in cooperation with others that provided a good rehearsal for the future demands of the workplace.

And that workplace is rapidly changing. Dr. Farid Ohan, Director of Sharjah Colleges, often says that the primary focus of Mosaic is to open up a new and broader experience of the world around the students and visitors, to deepen understanding and create a shared sense of wonder. This laudable goal, particularly in connection with this year's theme, also connects with current ideas about left brain/right brain skills and career development. Daniel Pink, in an article for the Harvard Business Review, discusses what he calls 'the emerging right brain economy'. He discusses the emphasis being placed on aesthetics in today's marketplace and quotes a somewhat startling statement from Robert Lutz when he took over as chairman of General Motors: "It's more right brain. I see us as being in the art business. Art, entertainment and mobile sculpture, which, coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation." Pink continues "General Motors - General Motors! - is in the art business. So, now, are we all." (Pink in Nelson 2005).

The mentors involved can never really know if what we create here is truly that grail of education called lifelong learning. But if teaching is changing attitudes, opening minds and inculcating a desire for learning, then certainly, despite the enormous efforts required, Mosaic does that. For students are engaged in designing their own learning, and not just in the classroom or the computer lab but also in studios across both campuses, and in the Sports Complex, and in the fractal complexities of cyberspace.

GO 6: Teamwork & Leadership

Much of the material surrounding Mosaic was produced in groups of four, five or six students. When students were not actually producing work on their own, they were organizing themselves into groups and maintaining group cohesion over an extended period of time (sometimes as much as three months in advance of the event) and supporting and motivating each other to 'get the job done'. As one student said in the run-up to the event:

It is hard work and we are very busy, but most of the time we have fun and we also get to know each other better. The good things and the bad things come through when you work together on a big project, and you find out who is really talented and who is not. (Name withheld by request).

GO 7: Vocational Competencies

A plethora of competencies were on display as each 'tile' of the Mosaic was put into place, and some students found themselves developing competencies they never knew they had - and may never have expected to have had the chance to develop. This,

contrary to the opinions of some, is a good thing since it enables a wider variety of skill sets to be developed and a wider exposure to ideas and techniques. Although the pressure to produce results sometimes frayed the nerves of the most patient participant, everyone seems to agree that the event brought out the best in teachers and students and no-one would conclude that an atmosphere of academic excellence was not fostered. More importantly, the wide variety of artifacts produced, the many ways the information was obtained and shared, and the activities in which students were engaged provided a stunning insight into the complexities of the interplay between 21st century media and education.

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms - from print to video to the Internet. Media Literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society, as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (Share et al. 2005)

The media literate student is an empowered student, for they have at their disposal a broad spectrum of media forms, not only to analyse for their own intellectual development, but also to employ in the pursuit of the ability to develop their own 'voice.' Different audiences require different media forms and different media forms require different skill sets for production. Our students need to be exposed to the ever-broadening range of communication tools available today. Mosaic is an outstanding way of offering this exposure. Moreover, exposure to many media forms can also foster a critical awareness of those media forms, their strengths and their weaknesses. Producing media also brings the student into direct contact with the difficulties and challenges associated with framing language and optimally delivering visual communication to an audience. This in turn enables teachers to help students focus on the key questions and concepts associated with the pedagogy of media literacy (Share et al 2005)

In responding to the artistic output of thousands of years of human culture students are, consciously or unconsciously, engaged in a process of understanding, assessment and evaluation. They are engaging critically even if only at the level of "I like it" or "I don't like it". At a deeper level many are actively involved in reflecting upon the wider implications of art within cultures and communities. For example, the theme of the Higher Diploma English Debate Competition reflected this year's Mosaic theme, the main topic of debate was: Should Governments Subsidize Art and Artists. Such a topic brought forth a wide range of opinions that often reflected the prevailing philosophies of the disciplines in which the students were training. How much better is it then that as part of the ongoing debate competition, each team had to also debate both in support of and against the issue under debate. For example, Communication Technology students who study the arts had to not only present arguments to show their deeply cherished belief in the value of the arts within their community but also dig deep and find the arguments to undercut their own most cherished notions - critical thinking indeed.

Conclusion

Perhaps the single most valuable aspect of Mosaic in terms of pedagogical goals is the

fact that students are engaged in the process of designing their own education. The wide range of learning experiences, creative endeavours, workshops held on campus (from pottery making to quilting), the full spectrum of media forms employed to collect and reflect the learning that takes place, engender a sense of ownership in the students about the material they are creating. As any educator will agree, this is one of the most difficult but most crucial outcomes to attain if real learning is to take place - learning that truly lasts a lifetime. This sense of pride and ownership becomes even more evident as the few short days of the Mosaic event itself unfold. Students and teachers are able to show off the results of their weeks and months of work and share ideas painstakingly uncovered, conclusions unexpectedly discovered and critical vocabulary previously unknown or unnoticed. They can with pride present achievements created by true team efforts and share with the youngsters who visit the wealth of material they have become familiar with. They can answer questions posed by the dignitaries who grace the event with aplomb and critical awareness. They can be, in fact, literate.

The quote at the beginning of this paper about education being a garden where questions grow reminds us that the garden we are cultivating is the future, that what grows in it will grow whether we are there or not, and that the outcomes we set in motion now will probably not be witnessed by us. We proceed on faith; let it suffice.

So, the ripples keep on expanding ever outward, sometimes in bewildering complexity as they interact with ripples from other sources. How important it is that students are empowered to recognize the direction the ripples are taking and, just as importantly, the direction from which those ripples came, and who or what produced them, and why.

There is a story that when Mondrian was painting over some old canvases he had lying around, a friend reproached him for covering up perfectly good paintings. "I'm not trying to make paintings," he said. "I'm trying to find things out."

(Kernan 2000 :222)

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