



Some students bravely attempted a two color print, which requires two different plates. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

PRESSING INTEREST

Tallahassee Classical teacher ties lessons together with printing press

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The new Tallahassee Classical School opened its doors to students in August and their art teacher, Robert Yorke, wasted no time in outfitting his classroom.

He applied for and received an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. The grant was made possible this year through philanthropic support from the Duke Energy Foundation's Powerful Communities program. With the grant funds and an additional supplement by the school, Yorke purchased a printing press, a device of epic historical proportions that aligns closely with the school's liberal arts focus.

At Tallahassee Classical School, history is infused throughout the curriculum and studied in chronological order as the backbone structure for learning, beginning with ancients and progressing forward to the moderns in history, science, literature, art, and music. Subjects are interrelated and students are taught the connections between the disciplines.

For Yorke, a printing press offered a tangible way to illustrate those connections.

He anticipated the press would "bring to life the history components of my course, allowing students an experiential knowledge of the printing



Students at Tallahassee Classical School make colorful prints with their new press. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

processes which have pushed our world into the contemporary era. From the Gutenberg processes which helped extend literacy around the world, to the leaflets that provided for human rights discourse during revolutionary periods, traditional printing has left its mark prominently on our collective culture."

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Press

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The allure of the printing press

The art of printmaking originated in the Far East and dates to at least the fifth century. Designs were carved into wood, inked and pressed upon textiles or paper.

With an undergraduate fine art degree in printmaking, Yorke understands the allure of the press and predicted his students would be captivated by the machinery and analog process.

“Their hands are so used to digital appliances. Just the idea that you have to apply force to the press is foreign to them because you apply no force through electronics. Printmaking is so physical and you can’t skip any steps. It’s a lengthy process,” Yorke said.

The inner workings of the press are visible to the students, which allows for a deeper understanding of how the device works as a cohesive system and serves as a tacit metaphor for the school’s interconnected curriculum. “I see students who maybe aren’t terribly interested in making art in general but every single one of them is interested in that press.”

Currently, more than 100 students in

fourth through eighth grades are using the press. They’re learning about its history and applying their knowledge of art elements like line weight and contour in their compositions. Students are also gaining mastery of the printmaking process, including the preparation of the printing plates where they incise their design and apply colored ink.

Hands-on engagement with ink

Addison Davis said, “I’m surprised how long it takes and how many steps there are.” The seventh-grader explained, “to print, you have to carve deep into the foam. Then you have to cover it with ink. Then you put a piece of paper on both sides. The last step is to roll it through the printer.”

Eighth grader, Elijah Edwards shared that one of the most challenging aspects is “trying to get the best colors together on the plate and how to do it. It got easier when learning more about plates, printing, what choices to make, and how to make better choices.” Elijah’s favorite part of printing “is listening to the satisfying sound of the roller, rolling on ink and then rolling onto the plate.”

In addition to experiencing the delights and intricacies of the process, students are also learning about printmak-

ing’s omnipresence in the modern world.

Seventh-grader Carmen Diaz said she’s now thinking “more about how things around me are made. Everywhere are signs and other prints. Pictures or paintings in museums, stores, and restaurants could actually be prints, and I had no clue.”

One of Yorke’s goals was to showcase how much printmaking affects his students’ everyday lives and our collective culture.

“Once you pull out a dollar bill, all the students are paying attention and they didn’t realize it’s a print. The man who illustrated Washington was a famous artist and this dollar bill is an actual piece of art. We talk about the utility of that. Printmaking touches on so many aspects of life,” said Yorke.

Connecting with physical process

One group of fifth-grade girls personified that notion. “They were already engaged in artmaking but after the press arrived, and they understood that they could make an infinite edition of prints, they were actively trying to trade their prints for their classmates’ printing time. They’d created a whole bartering system, essentially a very strange monetary system which was super unexpected to

me,” laughed Yorke.

As students awaken to the value, ubiquity, and power of the press, they’re also developing a sense of the personal significance printmaking can have in a world that’s increasingly more abstract than concrete.

“Electronic life is good in so many ways, but it really does wash the individual in this noise. For students to poke their heads above that and make a physical thing that’s theirs; a manifestation of their mind that they made real is really unusual for them,” Yorke said.

“Contemporary life is so smooth because we don’t want anyone to get hurt and we’d prefer people to be happy and that’s all good. But if you create a completely smooth environment, that texture is missing. For some students, it’s like they’re scrambling for purchase. When you give a kid a physical art process, it’s like a hand hold, something for them to dwell upon.”

This article is part of COCA’s Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area arts educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).