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Cambium

VOL. 2, NUMBER 1

INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM FROM THE ARBOR SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES

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ARBOR SCHOOL
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

HOME TO SCHOOL, SCHOOL TO HOME

The start of school can be an anxious time. Alarms ring early, breakfast is rushed, backpacks are loaded and re-loaded. From the languor of the swimming pool, summer camp, and basement forts, children are thrust back into work periods, recesses, and assessments. For many, children and teachers alike, the transition can be jarring.

As teachers, we know that the 7,500 hours per year children spend away from us, including their summer vacations, have as much to do with their educational success as the 1,100 hours they spend in our care. But crossing the bridge from school to home requires an invitation. Parents must be willing partners in promoting the growth that is our aim; we must communicate to scaffold children's growth in both environments, school and home, in synchrony and harmony.

This issue of Cambium explores some strategies for inviting that partnership, particularly that it may support students in work done independently at home. How can we help families and students with transitions: from summer to school, from grade to grade, or from school to school? How do we help bond a new class community? How can we create a school environment that builds bridges to home?

We focus especially on our most recent work, the structuring, supporting, and celebrating of summer homework assignments, as well as casting a light on some formal and informal ways we bring parents in on the secrets of their children's time at school.

When Arbor students arrive with summer homework in hand—a map, a mouse mobile, or a math project—they arrive with a common experience that can help ease their transition back to school. Their summer work as individuals allows us to launch their fall term as a community with a common vocabulary, experience, and understanding. It helps us begin to sink our teeth immediately into the real work of learning, rather than launching remedial preambles.

Any work done at home presents particular challenges, too. Successful assignments seem to be those that allow for flexibility, independent decision-making, and lots of space for experimentation. Students who feel successful seem to be those whose families provide structure and support, but know when to step back. The three-legged stool of home, school, and student is sturdy when each leg is firmly braced by the others.

— Ben Cannon
Senior Humanities

NOW YOU ARE SHARPENING PENCILS

PARENT ORIENTATION NIGHT

by Felicity Nunley

Above the closet shelf that serves as my desk hangs a beautiful poem by Naomi Shihab Nye entitled “What Is Supposed To Happen.” It evokes a parent’s wonder at her baby’s transition to schoolchild: “Now you are sharpening pencils.... People I never saw before / call out your name / and you wave.” The thrill of a child’s first days of kindergarten is familiar—the sharp new Dixon Ticonderoga #2s, a new lunchbox and shiny backpack and clean white sneakers. With much anticipation, the new student climbs on to the school bus or is picked up by the carpool, waving goodbye to home through the window. In the excitement of this milestone, the other transition—that of the parent left waving goodbye (Nye: “This loss I feel.... as your field of roses / grows and grows”)—is often overlooked. The art of sending a child off into a “workplace” that is distinctly her own is not to be underestimated. When the child steps off the bus, a parent wants to know everything—what was it like? What did you do? Most often these questions are left spectacularly unanswered by tired children in need of a snack.

That is where parent orientation night comes in. In the Primary (blended kindergarten and first grade) years, parents often wish to be a fly on the classroom wall. They want to see what their kids look like at school—do they smile? Whom do they sit with at snack? What do they look like as they work? And what do they do at school? Parent orientation night is an opportunity to give them a glimpse into their children’s new world and to give a meaty answer to not only *what* they do, but also *why* they do what they do at school.

Many tasks must be accomplished on parent orientation night. Clearly, curriculum and teaching methods must be explained. There are classroom routines to become familiar with and volunteer opportunities to sign up for, not to mention a central goal of the evening: getting to know one another and growing the classroom parenting community. A tall order for 70 minutes!

Arbor’s parent night is usually scheduled for a weekday evening in September. Our Primary classrooms are brightly lit and welcoming as people arrive, often straight from work, having battled rush-hour traffic or having set the kids up with a babysitter. They greet each other with the help of nametags and find that their children have written them a personal note. After they write a reply, they circulate around tables that hold sign-up sheets for them to volunteer for classroom help. They might browse the collection of professional books that we have laid out (see the sidebar for some favorite titles). Often they admire the children’s art adorning the walls or investigate their child’s favorite area of the classroom. As they explore, a convivial spirit fills the room—parents share stories of their children’s first days, comparing notes about soggy sneakers and sandy socks.

When everyone has arrived, the parents start their evening just as the children start their day—in a circle. After quick teacher introductions, we pose a question for the parents to answer as they introduce themselves. We hope that the question will elicit answers that will hit a familiar chord for all—so that we can feel the camaraderie of fellow parents in the same stage of parenting with all its joys and tribulations. One year we found ourselves short of time and raced through the introductions, but regretted it. Helping the parents to bond as a group pays invaluable dividends in

A wise piece of advice that I once heard from our director, Kit: If you really want to know what your kids did at school, tell them you saw a blue dragonfly.

Books I recommend to parents include:

Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*

Lucy McCormick Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing*

Jean Kerr Stenmark, Virginia Thompson, and Ruth Cossey, *Family Math*

Peggy Kaye, *Games for Reading: Playful Ways to Help Your Child Read*

Cathy Weisman Topal and Lella Gandini, *Beautiful Stuff!: Learning with Found Materials*

Ellin Oliver Keene, *To Understand: New Horizons in Reading Comprehension*

Regie Routman, *Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12*

Chip Wood, *Yardsticks*

organizing volunteer support throughout the year and in setting a tenor of teamwork and inclusiveness. At a small school like Arbor, this group of parents will be intimately connected for nine years, and some truly remarkable class groups that have gone on to play key leadership roles within the school have credited the invitation to spend time together in the Primary classroom as a major factor in cementing their commitment to “leaving Arbor even better than they found it” for future classes.



Some “icebreaker” questions we have used:

What brought you to Arbor?

Picture your child as an 18-year-old. What do you hope he/she is like?

I am the parent who... (relates to the children’s “I am the one who...” poems, which accompany their self-portraits on the classroom walls)

I never thought I would have to...

After introductions, it is time for the more formal presentations from the teachers. I have found it helps to structure our parent night by starting with the macro and moving to the micro. We start by presenting the two-year overview for our blended classroom, then examine the arc of Theme material for the nine months ahead, then the structure of a week, and finally the rhythm of a day. This gives us an opportunity to address the larger philosophical ideas that inform our teaching as well as to give parents a taste of everyday life in our classroom. In fact, as they sit in their children’s small chairs, we ask them to do some of the same things their children do—we play a math game or have them complete the daily sign-in routine.

To introduce the various teaching techniques we employ and to give parents fluency in the idiom of the classroom, we pile (I’d like to think of it as “artfully arrange”) a week’s worth of “stuff” in the middle of the circle. We display writing folders and book bags, spelling logs and high-frequency word cards, charts and italic books, math games and manipulatives, science experiments and self-portraits. Knowing that many adults, like their children, learn best by seeing and feeling and doing, we have discovered that a display of varied materials is most effective at conveying the many ways we approach the work in the classroom.

“Yes, but what does it look like?” To illustrate a day in the life of a Primary, we have been taking lots of pictures to document each part of our daily schedule. The slide show starts with children arriving at school and follows them through the day—at work, at play, eating lunch and, finally, donning their backpacks and heading home. Nothing demonstrates the life of the classroom quite as clearly as seeing it with your own eyes.

As the evening is winding down, the parents often want to know what they can do to support their child at home. This is a fine opportunity to communicate what we know about what children need. We can encourage home routines that include a sit-down family dinner and ensure enough sleep. At this point, we often turn the conversation to childhood in general and the particulars of this developmental stage. Heads knowingly bob as we mention “disequilibrium” at the half-year birthdays and smiles appear in anticipation of the approaching independence of seven-year-olds. It is also an opportunity for like-minded parents to support each other in striking a balance between structured time at school or activities and unstructured time for play.

At the end of the evening, we hope that everyone has gotten to know one another a bit better and had their questions richly answered. We hope that a firm foundation has been laid for conversations and friendships that will last a long time. Invariably after parent orientation night, the parents are bombarded by questions from their children: “What did you do at school last night?”

Carol Avery, *...And with a Light Touch: Learning about Reading, Writing, and Teaching with First Graders*

Bobbi Fisher, *Thinking and Learning Together: Curriculum and Community in a Primary Classroom*

Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*

Including a weekly schedule in the handouts is especially helpful. This lets parents attire their children with proper shoes on PE days or schedule doctor’s appointments with the least disruption. Some parents post the schedule prominently at home so they can ask specific questions that will elicit more information from their children: “What project did you work on in Design today?” “What did you do at Buddy Time?” “What did your math group practice?”

Caution: be sure to check that every child appears in the slide show. Similarly, make sure that no child appears too often. Parents notice!

Cycles of “equilibrium and disequilibrium” are discussed in Your Five-Year-Old and related books by Louise Bates Ames and Frances Ilg.

SETTING SAIL FOR SCHOOL

PRIMARIES (AND MICE) ON A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

by Robin Gunn

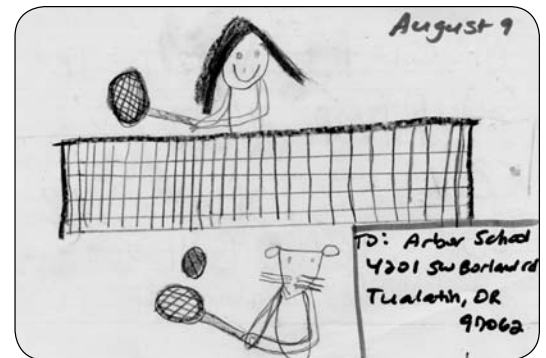
We ask students to take risks each day that they enter our classrooms. The first day of school is no exception as children filter into the rooms that will house a bulk of their learning, wearing a patchwork of trust, vulnerability, and willingness on their sleeves. What if, as they enter, they do so with a physical object that creates a common ground, a connection to their new classmates? What if, when they glimpse the walls of their classroom, their drawings and handwritten names are already settled there? Objects and pencil markings made at home, couched in support and trust, now stand in our classrooms as symbols of welcome and of our promise to nurture the risk-taking that is learning.

As the year progresses, Primaries will journey to imaginary lands, take on the identities of passengers on the Mayflower, study the migrations of animals, and follow the voyage of Odysseus.

These goals provide the framework for the summer homework at Arbor. For Primaries (kindergarten and first-grade children), who will soon embark on a year of “Journeys” curriculum, the invitation to set sail comes in the form of a mouse. This is a very particular mouse, constructed of felt and pipe cleaners under the dexterous fingers of parent and teacher volunteers and sent via post. The arrival is prefaced with a letter detailing two assignments: for the children to design and create a water vessel for their mouse, one that they can carry in their own hands, as well as to send two postcards to their teachers telling of their summer adventures with their mice. After all, a trip to the grocery store or tagging along for a swim lesson can be quite an adventure for such a little mouse.

“Mouse mail” is a welcome sight as the postcards fill our mailboxes in the latter part of summer. The children tell their stories in ways that are comfortable for them. Sophia wrote about her mouse, Whyesta, joining her for a tennis lesson, her postcard complete with an illustration of a mouse playing tennis. Griffin covered the front of his postcard with a picture of a kickball game that depicts the players and his mouse, Red. Paris drew a picture of Jordan, her mouse, tucked in a colorful purse for security on the roller coaster. Many a mouse visited grandparents in such states as Ohio, Montana, and California. Whether near or far, these journeys were recorded, celebrated, and finally displayed around the room in anticipation of the first days of school.

As for the second assignment, to create a mouse-size water vessel, we must wait until the calendar page flips to September. When the time comes these brave Primaries arrive with their boats carefully cradled in arms or held in the protective cup of two hands. The adventurous mice make their debut within frameworks of cleverly constructed materials. Nina’s clay boat, shaped by her hands, has two toothpick benches and an



anchor that can be tossed off the bow. She reports that the benches double as seat belts. Jack points to the bundle of branches that form the hull of his raft, made seaworthy by an impressive amount of hot glue. Peter used both glue and tape to transform coffee cans, cardboard and yogurt cups into a comfortable vessel. He lifts up his boat to reveal twelve carefully placed corks he feels will ensure his boat's flotation. Maddie excitedly demonstrates how her sail moves from one side to another, the mast solidly glued to a painted pie plate.

And so the day begins. The goals of this summer assignment are specific, but the process lends itself nicely to the interests and learning styles of individual children. We are asking students to find their own way into an assignment and then to share the finished product with us. They are learning an invaluable skill: to take a task designed by someone else and make it their own.



Abe, teacher Lauren, Vivek, and Sarah admire Henry's bottle boat with rubber band propeller

A bridge between home and school is created, too. The process the children completed at home and the journeys they took during the ten weeks of summer all hold a story, a sense of knowledge gained, a burgeoning expertise about the ways of felt mice and of boat construction. Each individual joins the larger group with valuable contributions gleaned from experience. Those first conversations, whether between student and teacher, among peers, or from family to family, are often initiated across the bridge of the "mouse experience." First-day anxieties ease as children admire features on classmates' boats or commiserate about the challenges of gluing together seventy-eight popsicle sticks. New friends find commonalities in the anchors they have made out of clay or steering wheels of cardboard. They gather around a large tub of fabric, shoulder to shoulder, fashioning outfits for their mice. Whether a mouse dons a pipe cleaner scarf to keep warm or a purple cape to fly speedily through the air, whether a boat has a tinfoil flag or a mesh hammock, these Primaries enter with something held in common. That shared experience forms an important first step in what will become our collective journey as a Primary class.

The mice and boats provide inspiration for activities that foster a sense of community within the newly formed group, as well as opening our yearlong theme of Journeys. The Primaries pair up to draw each other's boats. They report back to the group on details, such as fishing nets and propellers, that their classmates just shouldn't miss. There are lively discussions about what makes a boat float as children rally for corks, wood, paddles, and engines. "Sink and Float" experiments fill the room with excitement and surprise at the floating block and the sinking eraser. The children do an inventory of their boat materials to find that seventy-eight popsicle sticks were used on one, while twenty pompoms were used on another. Boat scavenger hunts, a boat museum in which each Primary class presents their work to the other, and games that sort and classify boats fill our day as we make the most out of having these water vessels as centerpieces in the classroom. And inevitably, someone wonders aloud whether his boat will safely carry his mouse down the rapids of the Rill, a sculptural stone water-course built just outside the door of our classroom. A new adventure is hatched—perhaps the mice should now send postcards detailing the thrills of life at school!

Nili explains the features of her mouse's boat to Sophia and Maddie



We hear from families that stories of these activities are told in after-school car rides, at the dinner table, or in those sleepy moments just before bedtime. The bridge, it would seem, is open in both directions as the Primaries find ways to bring their school experiences home.

Want to make felt mice for your own classroom? Instructions are available for download here: <http://www.arborschool.org/pdfs/feltmice.pdf>

FAMILIES TO OREGON

JUNIORS SEEK PATTERNS IN PERSONAL HISTORIES

by Janet Reynoldson and Lurline Sweet

Seamus stood in front of his 20 classmates and two teachers, proudly pointing to his colorful map of the United States among the many maps that filled an entire wall of the Junior Up classroom. He was the brave one, the one who went first. Seamus used his map to tell the story of his relatives in North America, the branches of his family indicated by a constellation of smiley face stickers. He then invited his new classmates to share what they wondered and noticed.

This student-made map is a homework assignment that every second- and third-grader is asked to complete before we begin our yearlong study of Communities. The map is more than an exercise to keep brains whirring throughout the vacation; it launches an investigation into how people live together and use resources, how communities form and re-form in new places, that will culminate in a re-enactment of the Oregon Trail journey in the spring. It builds familiarity with the geography of North America that will be essential in understanding the Oregon Trail history. It helps us become astute at recognizing patterns in human stories, too. As more and more Juniors shared, it became apparent that this particular class has many relatives on the east and west coasts of the United States, but few in Middle America. Throughout our sharing, students commented, "I have family in New York, too!" or "I have been to Vermont and New Jersey to see family," or "I used to live in New York, but we came here for my dad's work, just like you." All of this noticing and comparing brought forward all we had in common, so we naturally became interested in



Spud describes his family's journey to Oregon

asking *why*: why had so many of our families relocated to Oregon? We took hands-up tallies and discovered that over half of the students' parents moved here for work, several came because a previous generation sought work and better opportunities, some came to be with family, and most others came here to choose a certain quality of life.

Along with the map, in-coming Juniors were asked to write down the story of how their families came to Oregon. This story was to be a collaboration with parents or an independent piece of writing; it was up to individual families to decide the best approach to the assignment. The children entered in September with an opportunity to bring something of home to school, anticipating the sharing of their family stories with new classmates. Parents eager to participate in preparing their Juniors for work at a new grade level had the opportunity to do so, while parents wishing to stretch their children's independence could opt to step back from the writing.

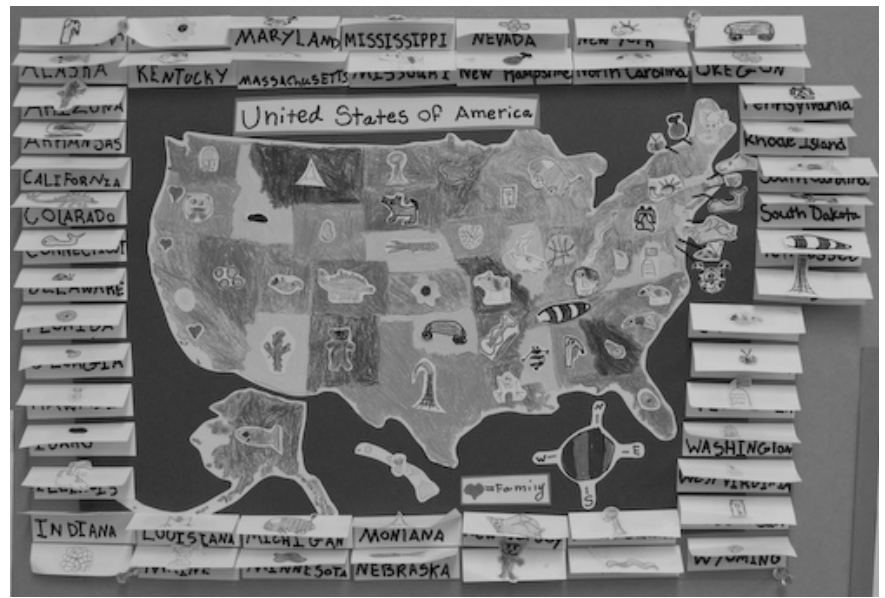
Seamus explained how one side of his father's family left Germany to seek religious freedom and first came to Nova Scotia, on to Boston, and finally settled in Portland, while the other side of his father's family moved from South Dakota during the Great

Many students guessed that remaining near the ocean must have appealed to their families. Hayden volunteered that his uncle is a sailor, so it would make sense for him to live near the sea.

At the Junior level, Arbor students begin to have regular homework. Parents have an important role to play in supporting this new independent work so that children feel a sense of accomplishment from effort and persistence.

Depression due to bad farming conditions. Seamus's mother's family moved to Portland from Seattle to raise a family in a smaller community.

We asked the children to think about the idea of being pushed out of place due to bad circumstances versus being pulled to a place by opportunity. Together with his classmates, Seamus decided that one side of his family was pushed out of places and the other was pulled to Oregon. Others came to the conclusion that most of their families were pulled to Oregon. We filled a two-sided chart that put families on either the "Push" side or the "Pull" side. Families whose stories contained both elements were placed in the middle of the chart.



Two students who took a great deal of time to make this project their own: Elise (left) added a third dimension, forming each state in polymer clay and mounting tiny pictures of her relatives on toothpicks; Sophia (right) created an elaborate system of illustrated symbols to identify the states.

These beginning conversations about the reasons people might seek a new home feed into the overarching ideas for our whole study of communities and human migrations. Returning to our initial observations about where our relatives live in North America, we began to wonder and discuss why people choose one place over another. By asking why, we were linking each child's family to a larger community and a human tradition of making choices for the safety and benefit of their families. The choices made by Seamus's family many years ago were not so different from the choices that another classmate's family made in the last ten years. While we don't talk about it in such remote and academic terms, the Juniors are beginning to explore truths and questions that engage sociologists.

Some students found they didn't know enough about their families' decisions to move from one place to another and returned home with more questions for their parents; those parents were able to learn about the rich conversations we had had and to help their children contribute anew at school the next day. Some of these family stories may even find their way into our curriculum; two years ago we were fortunate to be able to read portions of the Oregon Trail journal of a student's great-great-grandfather to help bring to life the motivations for and challenges of that journey. This assignment also serves the broader Arbor goal of developing empathy in our students. By imagining the circumstances of others' lives, we hope to instill an inclination to consider other perspectives that will serve our students well in the many communities they will inhabit.

A STRONG SENSE OF PLACE

INTERMEDIATES DESIGN BOOK RESPONSES

by Fran Hossfeld

Summer seems to be a natural time of year for reading and reflecting. In order to extend the proficiency we work to help students build during the year in literacy, critical thinking, and empathy, we constructed this summer's home assignments to revolve around reading and reflection. We wanted to offer our students a chance to make independent choices, to think deeply about and connect personally with the books they read, to create a project that was uniquely their own, and to practice writing and designing the visual presentation of their reflections. In addition, we wanted to craft an assignment that would allow us to gain insight into our Intermediates as individuals as well as to assess their skills.

With a yearlong theme of Environments ahead of us, we created a list of books with a strong sense of place at the heart of the stories. This concentration on environments and place seemed to lead to a summer assignment that would involve mapping of some sort. We asked our students to read one of the six books (see the sidebar) and to reflect on that book by creating a visual "map" including images from the story and personal reactions to the story. A variety of choices under the umbrellas of six writing prompts were designed to draw out the students' thinking about the book, and a large piece of paper would invite attention to the aesthetic presentation of the response.

The maps that arrived on the first day of school show a wide variety of approaches to the project. They provide clear evidence that students connected personally, understood deeply, questioned the text they were reading, and planned and crafted their map with intention and persistence.

The first mapping prompt asked students to ask questions of the text or to make more personal connections. "I wonder if my dad would have been a hunter if we lived close to the forest?" "I wonder why Winnie thought there was no talking when there is food to eat. I mean, she didn't test it." "I wonder how different the book would be if it was a girl instead of a boy running away from home?"



Two of the prompts asked students to make connections between the text and their own lives or background knowledge. An excerpt from Sydney's response to *The Yearling* was, "Jody and I both look up to our dads when we need help because they know everything about everything and are always understanding about our mistakes." Louis made a connection to a unit of study from last year: "This text reminds me of immortality (because the Tucks live forever) and immortality reminds me of the Greek

gods. The Tucks unknowingly drank from an underground spring that made them live forever, and the Greek myths say the Greek gods live forever too. Angus Tuck hated living forever but the Greek gods like living forever..." Lucas chose a quote for this prompt and wrote about how it reminds him of where his family goes camping.

Natalie Babbitt,
Tuck Everlasting

Meindert DeJong,
The Wheel on the School

George Dennison,
And Then a Harvest Feast

Jean Craighead George,
My Side of the Mountain

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings,
The Yearling

Laurence Yep,
Dragon's Gate

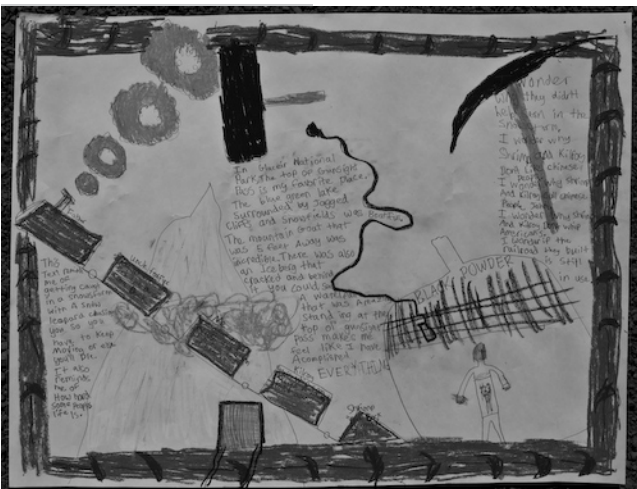
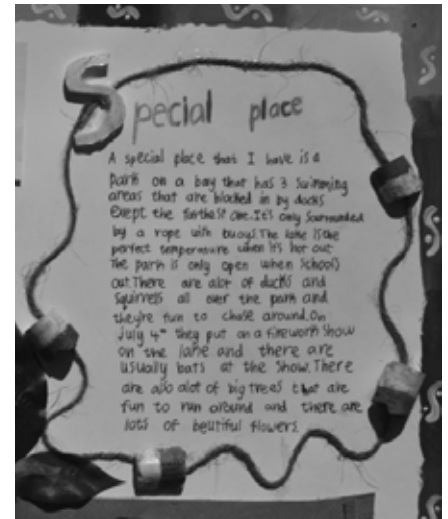
**#1: Begin five sentences
with I wonder...**

**#2: This text reminds
me of...**

#3: Describe a special place, and how it feels to be in that setting. What does the landscape look like? If you listen carefully, what will you hear there? What is *not* in that place that helps give the area a special feel? How do the natural features like trees or water contribute to or reflect the mood of the place?

The other longer focused writing prompt was a personal reflection and did not need to be related to the book at all. This invited students to use their senses to create rich descriptions and was very successful in encouraging our Intermediates to produce some of their best writing.

Students captured one of the scenes from the book that they remember vividly with a drawing and identified the moment with a caption. Sydney's colored pencil drawing of Jody and Penny watching the whooping cranes dance is an example of why the maps around our classroom are so visually engaging: each one gives an instant impression of the setting and the story of the book that inspired it. There are lists of quotes from the books that the students felt captured a sense of place. We asked them to look at dialogue and dialect: what examples can you find of the particular speech patterns, accents, and distinct vocabulary that help to place the story or create its particular setting? The students



At the Intermediate level, it is important for parents to let students take the lead in planning and crafting independent work. We encourage them to structure time and space for homework, to do their own work alongside their children, and to praise effort, persistence, craftsmanship, and problem-solving.

also thought about the colors that they imagined in the environment where their book takes place and found ways to use them on their maps. Ben placed his *Dragon's Gate* quotes in a string of train cars climbing a mountain and used bleak grays, browns, blues and black to evoke the harsh conditions workers suffered in building the transcontinental railroad.

Perhaps most importantly for students of this age, this summer homework activity challenged them to make an assigned task their own. If the project were done in class, the children would undoubtedly have many questions for the teacher: "Is it okay if I do it this way?," "I can't really tell what colors would be in this environment because I've never been there—what should I do?," "Can I make a 3-D map instead?," "What if I can't find the right size of paper?" and so on. In the absence of a teacher, the students had to trust their own judgment and answer their

own questions as best they could. There were plenty of choices for students to make within the guidelines of the assignment, which led to unique results. This made our sharing of the maps particularly rewarding.

We made time on the first day of school to celebrate the careful work students had done on their maps and to reflect on the reading and mapping. Students gathered in groups according to the book they read and did a number of different activities. They wrote sticky-note compliments (Summer to Louise: "I like to think about your special place with owls hooting, little chipmunks, and birds singing.") to place on each other's maps, identified their favorite two prompts, discussed the book, and shared questions and "I Wonder..." statements. The colorful maps are displayed on the walls of the classroom, where they continue to draw admiring attention between lessons. Clusters of students are often seen pointing out a clever feature or a beautiful drawing to their friends. Our group reflection about the assignment was a nice way to come together as a new community, to see that we had all been working toward a common goal, but with a wealth of approaches and expressive styles. We hope to foster this sense of independent expression in the work our Intermediates will do throughout the year.

Maps by Sydney Wagner, Cole Pearson, and Ben King-Hails.

SPANISH BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

by Caroline Hurley

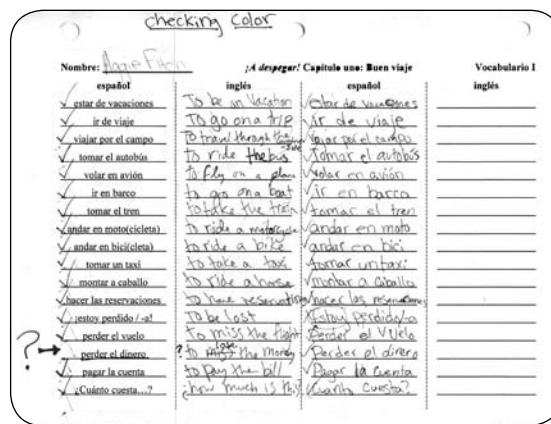
Any foreign language classroom exists at a series of crossroads: ahead is a portal to a whole cosmos of cultural and linguistic systems, but the path traverses vast countries of hard-won memorization and grammatical understanding. As a sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade Spanish teacher, I walk the line between teaching the linguistic nitty-gritty and playing the role of cultural ambassador. My students learn the systems that undergird another, very present, culture. They also, however, explore various approaches to that learning itself, including ways to engage their brains in the language while at home. This issue's theme of school to home thus dovetails nicely with the nature of the language classroom, which perches between school and the wider world.

These days it is popular to speak of “living,” “modern,” or “world” languages rather than foreign ones. But no matter how much cultural tap dancing we do in the classroom, homework can tend toward a nightly stretch of paper-and-pencil-heavy solitary confinement. While it is true that home practice is an awfully useful way to reinforce what students learn in class, it can be tricky to carry over the spirit of interactive communication into home practice. To this end, discussing *how* to practice at home is very much a part of what my students and I do in class.

In preparation for their first Spanish classes, first-year students take on the role of teacher and notice their own students' (often parents or siblings) struggle with letters of the Spanish alphabet. As we share our teaching successes and frustrations, we discuss individual differences in learning style as well as common approaches based on what our brains need in order to fully absorb new information: my students soon learn that reading, writing, speaking, and hearing are a mantra for language teachers. This year, borrowing an idea from a Riggs Institute training seminar, I talked with my students about trying to “light up” different areas of the brain linked with these discrete tasks. The aim was to help them see a biological reason for my asking them to look, listen, and repeat in class and to say aloud what they write in their homework.

Students also try out various “study techniques” in our classes and consider which seem most effective for themselves. Of course, there are always flashcards. We discuss various ways of organizing and interacting with those cards, including strategies to involve a second person in their use—I find that students can invent more interesting ways than I could assign. Some students like to prominently post a word in English and Spanish on either side of a door at home and read and say it each time they pass by.

We also regularly use “accordions.” Turning a sheet of paper sideways, I set up four columns of alternating English and Spanish. The first column already contains the words in Spanish; students then write in the English in the second column. The next step is checking that the second column is complete and correct; this can either be a student job or an opportunity for teacher assessment. Finally, the first column is folded behind and the sheet is tucked away; we discuss



This principle can be extended to eight columns if the back side of the page is used; it might start with English, or the students might, once they are able to check their work carefully, be asked to make their own accordions from scratch.

the importance of studying in several small sessions rather than all at once. Later, they test themselves by writing in as many of the English words in the third column as they can, checking their work afterward by unfolding the accordion.



The crucial aspect is the checking; as with flashcards or any similar device, a word initially written wrong must not be the model from which to learn.

Since the term “studying” can conjure the silent graze of eyes across paper, we look for ways to “practice” instead. I encourage talking to a family member or to a peer over the phone. A partner might prompt the student in a vocabulary drill, have a brief conversation, agree to be taught the vocabulary words, or participate in any other interactive, oral activity. Even talking to oneself when no one else is around can help cement new vocabulary and structures. Verbs are especially good for active practice; we play “mime theater”—which typically consists of the teacher saying the target word and the students silently acting it out—in class, and some students like to use it for home practice as well.

I have begun this article by imagining the day-to-day journey from the language classroom to the world beyond. However, home practice over the summer is a key component in how we begin our year together. While I always encourage students to seek out Spanish in the world via human interactions and media (even by turning on the language track and subtitles of their favorite DVDs), I also give specific assignments in June that are due on the first day of school in order to launch us into the new year. These summer projects, described below, are designed to be good thematic candidates for home study and to give the students creative outlets within which to begin piecing the language together and putting it to real use.

Beginning students, who have had just a couple of hours of instructional time the previous spring, complete three tasks, each focusing on a key foundational area. First, they practice brief exchanges in Spanish with anyone who is willing. This often pulls in parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors, underscoring from the outset the purpose of language learning: to communicate. Second, they peer into the words themselves and make connections among English, Spanish, and Latin cognates. Third, they must teach someone the Spanish alphabet and reflect on this experience by writing a note to me about what they tried and how it worked. Of course, the adage of learning things better by teaching them applies here, but more importantly, these reflections help us open a discussion of various learning approaches and what it takes to really master new material in our first fall classes. After having played the role of teacher, my students have a greater perspective on the need for repetition; revisiting trouble spots; combining seeing, hearing, and speaking; focusing on what is most important, etc.

Summer homework for students entering their second or third year of Spanish has two areas of focus: one to remind them of the pragmatic, communicative nature of the course and the other a unit of new vocabulary chosen for its suitability for at-home study. Again, learning new vocabulary at home works because the students have been primed in class to try out several approaches.

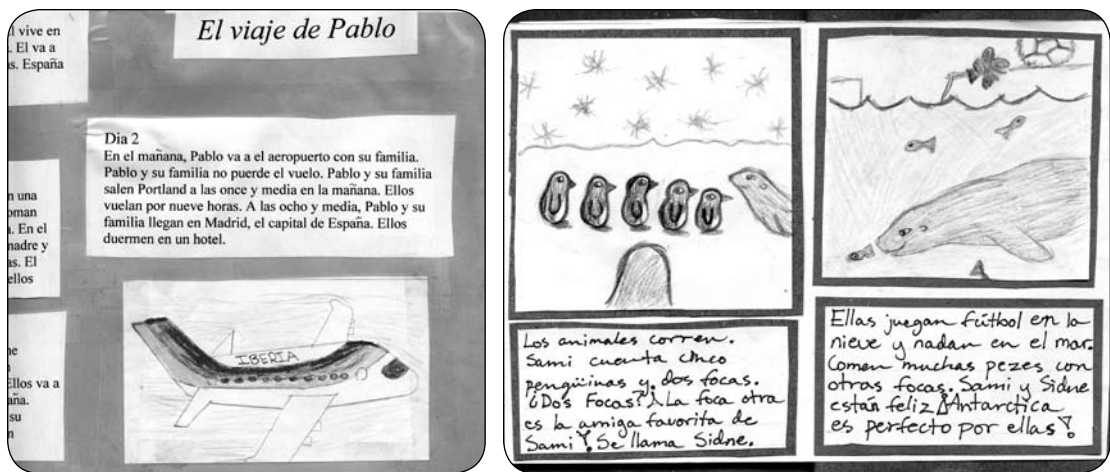
Entering second-year students are tasked with learning common household words for furniture, rooms, etc. Plastering the house with labeled sticky notes can help avoid the learning of new vocabulary being silent, solitary, and tedious. This year a parent told me that her house was so thoroughly bedecked with notes that the workers hired for a remodel couldn't help but learn some new vocabulary as well. To put these words to use, students draft a floorplan and label the rooms and furnishings of their own house or their dream house. Most students choose to accomplish this on a large sheet of paper,

Summer assignments work at Arbor as they are a supported part of the school culture; without administration, teachers, and parents in league on this issue, these ideas could be adapted to take place at the start of the school year.

“I taught the Spanish alphabet to my mom and it was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I basically had to tell her what it was every single time she tried to say it, I mean like about 50 times at least, and she still didn't learn it. Finally, after a lot of practice she can say the entire thing except for the x, y and z.”

but some choose to make overlays on sheets of tracing paper or even to make 3-D models. They then describe the house in writing; in the fall, they share their drawings and descriptions in class.

Entering third-year students, having studied Spanish-speaking countries in their second year, learn travel vocabulary such as airport and hotel terms. To put these words to use, students write and illustrate a real or imagined story of someone going on a trip. They share these stories with the class, silently and aloud, in the fall.



Entering second- and third-year students also have the job of keeping in touch with me over the summer. This could certainly be adapted to have them write to each other, depending on your goals for the activity. I display the postcards in my classroom; they can then be used as short readings to be passed around as well as pictures that can be described in Spanish. I ask for one letter or postcard and one voicemail message. I write to my students as well, either in response or as a nudge for reluctant writers. They leave messages on the school's answering service, which I then listen to and transcribe. Receiving postcards and voicemail is a real pleasure on my end, as the messages range from informative to hilarious and are unfailingly endearing. They also provide me with information about the students and their respective summer experiences as well as the raw data of common pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical errors that occur in (usually) pre-planned speech and writing. At base, they simply renew my passion for beginning again with a new group of young minds.

Not only does active/interactive practice cement new syntactic constructions and vocabulary in students' brains, it underscores language as fundamental communication. Even within homework, language need not only live on paper—nor can it.



"My dad had a problem with pronunciation, so I had to state each letter, slowly and firmly, approximately five times, before he got the pronunciation down flat. Then came the memorizing; he studied the paper hard, then closed his eyes and said around five letters, then moved on. [...] It was hard for my dad, learning the song, but he thinks it will be worth it, in the end."

Discovering that many of my students travel to Spanish-speaking areas motivated the travelogue assignment, but another prime candidate for home study is food. In fact, I used to ask entering third-year students to label the food in their kitchens and to create either a food diary or a menu. These activities do not require as much sophistication with the target language as storytelling does, but are suited to an earlier year of study.

Travelogues by Seby Hall, Mamo Waiianuhe, and Izzy Owen

SCHOOL TO HOME, WITH FEATHERS AND A RED MEGAPHONE

by Maureen Milton

I love mail and I, like a 45-year-old toddler, think that everyone else shares my feelings. As a result, I like to think that the mail that I send to Arbor children at home makes them happy.

When the Library receives a donated book, whether a birthday book or a once-beloved title demoted from a child's bookshelf, I have to send the family a receipt, so I enclose it in a thank you note to the child. In addition to thanks, I also usually enclose a dried flower or leaf or one of the feathers that I've gathered here and there, adding a sticker over the envelope seal and employing the most garish of the post office's stamps. If the line isn't long at the post office, I will even ask the post officer to hand cancel the loud stamps. Even to our older students, brightly stamped, feather-filled thank you notes are good.

Less elaborate, yet often still hand-cancelled, are the occasional summer postcards that children receive from me. As a school librarian, I spend lots of summer time reading children's books, new and old. This summer when I was reading Jacqueline Kelly's *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*, I thought of three or four students who would love the book and sent each one a postcard telling them so. Other students received a quick note with a title, author's name and a scrap of information that might be enticing. (I noted that the chapters alternate voices in Frances O'Rourke Dowell's *The Secret Language of Girls*). The cards don't take long, but they do usually result in a little spate of children at the Library door on the first day of school, gazing longingly through the glass in the hope of finally acquiring the vaunted title. A few arrive smug, having read the recommended book already and wondering if there's another in the series.

But where often a librarian (even one who sends stickered, feathered mail) might be a background figure in the minds of parents, I also wear another hat at Arbor—or more often, a rain slicker, accessorized with a red megaphone. In our elaborate three o' clock carpool pick-up, parents eager to collect their daylong-gone children assemble their cars into two courteous lines while I call out the names of the backpack-strapped children to be escorted and buckled by the teachers into their respective cars. Dutiful dictatrice that I am, my foremost thought is the safe as well as somewhat efficient delivery of the little and big ones into their chariots.

And each day the earnest teachers collude with each other and the rapt parents to thwart my plans for efficiency. As a beloved Primary teacher bundles a tired kindergartener into his mother's minivan, instead of silently buckling that sweet child into the swaddling car seat, she will actually slip into conversation with the parent, perhaps relaying a small success of the day in the classroom, or issuing a warning about a stinging argument that occurred at recess in the sandbox. A Senior math teacher will relay a sick student's assignment as he's waving the driver forward to line up under the fir tree. Even the Intermediate teachers, known widely for their fine manners and attention to detail, will distract a carpool driver with some diverting story of a child's success in Design or his prowess at wall ball. Meanwhile, I and the megaphone have cars out of order, lining up back to the main road, and anxiety is pooling under my arms. While I try desperately to urge the snaking line of drivers forward, the conniving teachers

are holding microconferences right in the midst of carpool!

The parents love it; the teachers love it. And I suppose that, despite my chastising the chattering pairs to just get in the car and go get a cup of coffee, I must confess that even I have been known to relay a charming anecdote about a third-grader's recent reading coup, or have quizzed a parent on his older child's high school happenings, and, now and then, I have put the megaphone down and collected an overdue library book or two as we wave goodbye. As we send the children from school to home at the end of another day at Arbor, the informal tidbits we send with them are brightly stamped, hand delivered and warmly received.



A bird's eye view of carpool: Primaries play in the Rill under the fir tree while they wait for their cars, and Maureen and her megaphone can be seen beyond.

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CORRECTION

In our "Community and Stewardship" issue, we failed to credit Terri Ashley and the teachers at The Willow School of Norwich, Vermont as the originators of Recess Chat. A number of wonderful ideas from The Willow School have been transmitted to Arbor by our mutual friend Lauren Ferris, and we regret the oversight that omitted proper acknowledgment in this instance.



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What content would you like to see offered in Cambium? Do you have ideas to improve it? Please send us an email.

Masthead by Jake Grant, after an 1890 botanical illustration. Plant block print by Annika Lovestrand.

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A mouse boat by Henry Welt

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DIFFERENTIATION IN MATH**

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