HISTORY

Urban Montessori Charter School, in its sixth year, was designed with three pillars, Montessori, Design Thinking and Arts Integration. From the start, Design Thinking was supported by robust collaboration with Stanford d.school, including PD, staff trainings, stipended curriculum development time, loans of maker tools, and money for maker supplies. During the school’s third and fourth years, Design Thinking work by students included investigations into the different phases of the design thinking cycle, and design challenges that evolved from one-size-fits-all schoolwide challenges to challenges developed specifically for each instructional level, with some integration into other topics. There was less clarity in the vision for Arts Integration, with language in the charter showing the influence of Project Zero ideas emphasizing art integrated into core subjects, but was implemented most of the time by hiring visual art and music teachers who taught the subjects as studios, not integrated with classroom work (two years with part-time visual arts instructors, four years with part-time music instructors).
2016 - 2017 was a high point for the integration of Design Thinking and Arts at Urban Montessori, beginning with d.school stipended time and facilitation during the summer of 2016 for teams of Urban Montessori teachers to develop integrated units for the 1 - 3 and 4 - 6 levels. The units weren’t completed in the summer session, and lots of revision and recreation happened during the year, but it was crucial to have had the summer planning time. At this point support teacher, David Harris, who was the chair of both the Design Thinking and Arts Integration leadership teams, was named Creative Catalyst for the school. The d.school also increased its support, sending Ariel Raz to the site for approximately eight hours each week to help run Design Thinking professional development, and to support implementation of the integrated units, the documentation of units, and the use of Design Thinking processes in level planning meetings. The school also added a second part-time music instructor.

WHAT WORKS WHEN A PROGRAM GROWS AND SUPPORT DECREASES?

At the end of the 2016 - 2017 school year we learned that the d.school support would be dropping away. The immediate implication of that was that teachers didn’t develop a new set of integrated units for the 2017 - 2018 school year. Over that summer the school also added a middle school program, decided to move the 3 - 6 classes and the new middle school class to a different campus, and opened new K and 1 - 3 classrooms. Furthermore, as the school year began the Head of School resigned. We started the school year without any plans in place for the integration of Design Thinking and Art, and the feeling of being stretched incredibly thin. David realized that he wouldn’t be able to support the kind of integrated units that happened in 2016 - 2017, and, as he started the Agency by Design Oakland fellowship, he decided to use the fellowship work to experiment with some new ways of supporting teachers to integrate Design
Thinking and Art in their classroom. Over the course of the fall and winter he and his collaborators tried a few different strategies/models to support this work. Summaries are below, including a brief assessment of their effectiveness.

1. In September, a small group of 1st - 3rd teachers with Design Thinking and Arts experience pulled together a menu of shorter activities that work well at the start of the year, to introduce concepts, build community, and establish routines. **RESULT:** It was a nice list, but very few teachers accessed it. We did choose one activity that we agreed was especially good, and provided the materials for that activity in the resource room, and more teachers chose to do that one. On reflection, it seemed that creating a list but not providing any PD or other face-to-face chances to talk wasn’t effective.

2. The TK/Kindergarten teachers got together for monthly hour-long Arts Integration workshops throughout the year, led by a parent, Brooke Toczylowski. Brooke took this on independently, without support from anyone on staff. Some of these teachers were skeptical at first, wondering why they were being asked to focus on visual art and the Studio Habits of Mind in particular. **RESULT:** But the workshops were very well received and the teachers all increased the amount of visual art they did in the classroom and integrated into other content areas. They were especially effective because teachers were given the chance to actually make art themselves during the hour, which increased their confidence in teaching it, and Brooke supported the teachers by buying and getting reimbursed for the needed materials.

3. On November 3rd, Briah, David and Brooke ran a short Arts Integration and Design Thinking PD for all levels. This included a design challenge as well as breakout sessions on book making and on using thinking routines for critiquing social institutions and reading news articles from different lenses. **RESULT:** This was relatively successful, based on a follow-up survey, with the generated enthusiasm for thinking routines and bookmaking translating into several classrooms integrating them into activities in the following months.

4. After the winter break, David surveyed the 1st - 3rd grade team to see which of several ideas for mini units, incorporating both Visual Art and Design Thinking, they were interested in. The team was split, and David decided to develop the two units that most were interested in, and to try to support classrooms by holding weekly office hours. **RESULT:** This was somewhat successful, but no classroom followed through with either of the units, most choosing to do an activity or two from each unit. The approach works, but has the two big disadvantages of being very inefficient (time consuming, but not resulting in a lot of art making or design in classrooms), and doesn’t have the benefits of a whole level following a unit together (chances to discuss with other teachers, what worked, what could be improved, etc., in a professional learning community format).
5. In the 4th - 6th program, Briah Luther, the other Agency by Design Oakland fellow from Urban Montessori, led Design Thinking work, along with support teacher Eileen Lindley, leading Arts Integration work. Their plan was to run activities in their own classroom, then share them with the other two classrooms during collaboration time, so the other classrooms could run the activities the following week. **RESULT:** Briah and Eileen undertook some very interesting projects in their room, but the plan to share them with other teachers didn’t work, because there wasn’t time built in for the sharing.
In March 2018, Ana Carrasco joined David in the Agency by Design Oakland fellowship. She is a 1st - 3rd grade teacher and founding member of Urban Montessori and has been deeply involved in the Design Thinking work from the beginning. They worked together during the personal inquiry phase of the fellowship, looking at the results of the work David had done the past few months experimenting with and reflecting on different modes of support for teachers. Together they reconfirmed the importance of Design Thinking and Arts Integration to the school, reflected on how the work had been supported historically, and began thinking about the different possibilities for next year. Below is the text of the survey they created and shared with staff.

Text of Survey:

The two pillars of Arts Integration and Design Thinking are integral to the model of our innovative school. They were designed into the school from the start not just as enrichments to the traditional Montessori curriculum, but as curricular pillars. Arts Integration and Design Thinking are tools for multiplying the points at which students access the curriculum, and play an especially important role in engaging students who are having a difficult time engaging with work. They are also the type of work that will allow our students to see themselves as changemakers, people who have agency and know how to make things, understand systems, and create change.

Below are some different ideas, or alternate realities, for how the school's work in these two core areas could happen in the 2018 - 2019 school year. Vote for the one you think would work best, adding any comments you want, or type in your own idea!

1. Create a "Director of Arts Integration and Design Thinking" position (at least 50% time, could be combined with other duties to create a full position). This position would be responsible for planning and professional development for these two pillars.

2. Include Arts Integration and Design Thinking as responsibilities of the Level Leads who are chosen to be on the Instructional Leadership Team. They would have the option of selecting another teacher, possibly a support teacher, to head up Arts Integration and Design Thinking work at their level.

3. Create an "Integration Expert" position (again, at least 50%, could be combined with other duties to create a full position). This person would have a home in a multi-use room where they would sometimes teach students coming in from classrooms, and sometimes work with teachers (individually, or as level groups) to develop integration opportunities for projects/units they want to do in their classrooms. Integration with art, design, technology, science, computer
science are all possibilities.

4. Include Arts Integration and Design Thinking in the responsibilities of the Head of Instruction, who would do the planning and lead professional development for those areas.

5. Other:

Results of Survey:

Structure to support Arts Integration and Design Thinking

10 responses

- Create a "Director of Arts Integration and Design Thinking" position (at least 50% time, could be combined...)
- Include Arts Integration and Design Thinking as responsibilities of the Level Leads who are chosen to be...
- Create a "Integration Expert" position (again, at least 50%, could be com...)
- Include Arts Integration and Design Thinking in the responsibilities of th...

Would you like to play a role in the Arts Integration and Design Thinking work next year, outside your own classroom?

9 responses

Yes 33.3%
No 66.7%
Some takeaways from the survey results:

1. Half the people thought there should be a position established that would be responsible for planning and professional development for Design Thinking and Arts Integration, and another 20% selected the similar “integration expert” option. This points to the staff’s valuing this work and acknowledging that supporting them will take dedicated time.
2. 30% of people thought the work should become part of the Director of Instruction’s responsibilities.
3. There was no interest in having level leads, together with a partner, take on the work.
4. Most people were interested in playing a role in the work next year, beyond their classroom.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS & PROPOSALS

David Harris –

PROBLEM STATEMENT: A main problem I experienced while being the school lead for this work is that I had no access to leadership decision making, and wasn’t able to advocate for pushing the work forward, purchasing equipment, scheduling meetings and professional development, etc. The second main problem was that it was no longer possible for only one person, with little to no time in my day schedule, to support this work for all four levels (Primary, Lower Elementary, Upper Elementary and Middle School). I had failed to do that for the last two years. Also, though there is the possibility of more teachers participating in the Agency by Design fellowship next year, and also of a return of support from the d.school, Urban Montessori cannot rely on outside agencies to sustain the program, it needs to develop structures and school staff to do the work.

Short Term Proposal by David

For this upcoming school year, given the budgetary challenges, I would propose that the level leads (one teacher from each level, who represents the level on the Instructional Leadership Team, and runs level meetings several times a month), and a partner from each level, take on the Arts Integration and Design Thinking work. It would be cost effective. The level lead would be advocating for the work on the ILT, and making sure the necessary PD time was allocated, while the co-level advocate supports the logistics, as a teacher coach, facilitating the development of activities or units and running the PDs.

Ana Carrasco

PROBLEM STATEMENT: Teachers are already working hard to deliver the Montessori academic curriculum so there isn’t extra bandwidth for the “more creative” curriculum that we should be integrating. Additionally, I’m not an expert, and I need support to learn the skills myself and to then teach the kids. I need help supporting exciting hands-on projects and a sequentially integrated curriculum that has a clear progression to be successful.
**Long Term Proposal by Ana**  
Combine option #1 and #3 – we need someone on staff to hold the art and design work. This would involve but not be limited to curriculum mapping standards across multiple content areas and the arts, demonstrating and co-teaching arts integrated lessons, and planning and preparing arts integration lessons, assignments, assessments and materials. I also suggest a multi-use space where teachers could schedule time outside the classroom, where the teacher could serve students, and that teacher would also host outside specialists to build on curriculum.

**CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS**

Dear Colleagues, Board, and Future Head of School,

We believe it is imperative to prioritize time for planning, goal setting, and building structures and systems in the areas of Art Integration and Design Thinking Practices. Teachers and students would benefit from a clear, sequential curriculum, with hands on training and creative spaces to do this work. There could be a more diverse and differentiated curriculum, which could include inviting experts in to build on teacher creativity. These best practices and a clear arts and design curriculum would foster real project based learning. Classroom levels will experience a sense of identity and unity working through the various projects together. Teachers will feel more aligned in their practices, sharing out student work and learnings in professional learning communities.

Thus, professional development and hands on training throughout the school year in these areas is necessary for maximum support and growth. The Montessori philosophy is directly correlated with the design mindset, both emphasizing observation and understanding through empathy as well as intrinsic creativity and independence. They should be thought of as complementary and we need to build on that foundation. Art and design integration with Montessori would provide multiple access points for all learners.

Especially since a new Head of School will be in place next year, it is an important time to revisit and renew the systems and goals for these curricular pillars. We need to ask ourselves: *What do we want students to get out of this work? What should it look like day-to-day in classrooms? and What should the experience be for students moving through the program from Kindergarten to Middle School?*

There are hours of planning to be done and as shown above in the data, the teaching staff is ready and willing to do this important work. This demonstrates that teachers understand the significance of this work and know it will have a positive impact on their classrooms. It is critical that we make time to step back to see the big picture in preparation for this next year’s curriculum planning around art and design at Urban Montessori Charter School.