



HomeschoolNYC Newsletter

Celebrating Child-led Learning

Vol. 1, issue 4 March 2010

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February set a record for the most snowfall in a single month in NYC. It always gladdens the heart when enormous snowmen appear overnight, and laughing children sled down hills in various parts of the city. School children cried "Hooray!" when schools were closed, but my students and I regret our missed classes. My young playwrights are hard at work preparing for their performances next week. My lit club students are busy reading the books they have chosen and writing about what interests them. And we are all enjoying the snow!



Laurie Block Spiegel

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Scarred by School

In [Peter Gray's September 2009 blog](#) in *Psychology Today* called "[Freedom to Learn](#)," he refers to school as prison. He's not the only one to make this comparison. I have heard school referred to this way by students themselves! In his article, Mr. Gray explains that the school system is guilty of seven sins, including: the denial of liberty, the fostering of shame and hubris, interference with self-direction, linking learning with fear, and more.

While there may be some excellent schools and I have met some amazing teachers, many children are

damaged by their schooling experience. In her book, [Wounded by School](#), Kirsten Olson names the various wounds that she has seen in her work in public schools. These wounds include: the belief that we are not smart or are incapable of learning, anxiety from shaming experiences, anger towards teachers and adults due to past injustices, and a dislike or confusion towards learning that is shared and passed on. I attended a seminar on Moral Education at Columbia University last fall to hear Ms. Olson speak. I was deeply moved by her approach to the difficulties facing public schools today. Ms. Olson willingly confronts these problems like a courageous healer, always ready to open a dialogue.

One of the things Ms. Olsen cited as a crucial need is student-teacher mentor relationships, which seem to be lost in today's schools. When such a relationship does occur, it can be the turning point in a student's education. That teacher could become someone the student returns to year after year for support and guidance.

Ms. Olson's comments reminded me of how keenly I appreciate the close relationships I have with my homeschooled students and their parents. Because my students choose to return to me year after year, I am able to have an ongoing relationship with them that builds over time. I am also able to develop that same mentor relationship with some parents, helping them to make the most of what I do in my classes when they are at home with their children. I don't have to see my hard work and the growth in a child's esteem undone the following year with demeaning treatment from an uncaring teacher. Instead, I have the pleasure of watching my students blossom and grow from curious children into young men and women fueled by their own passions.

March Field Trip Ideas

Sunday March 14th is [Percy Jackson Day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), with free art activities for ages 5-17 in the Greek and Roman Galleries (registration required). You can also purchase tickets to hear the author, Rick Riordan, speak, or to attend an educator's workshop. But you don't have to attend this event to share in the fun. You can try the new self-guided [Percy Jackson & the Olympians Treasure Hunt](#) anytime, available free as a download or at the museum information desk. Search for ancient images of the [Olympic Games](#) too, in these same galleries. Use art as a primary resource and ask yourself what the images mean, how they were made, and if the works of art had a useful purpose. You can also draw your own images of monsters or heroes, and write your own heroic tale.

The end of winter marks maple sugaring time. This is an industry unique to northeastern North America, home of the sugar maple. This sweet treat was a gift to us from the Native Americans, who taught us how to tap the trees for syrup. Learning about the sugaring process is a lesson in science and social studies. You can partake in the maple sugaring experience at [Muscoot Farm](#), near Katonah (less than an hour north of NYC), on March 7th and 14th from 11 am - 2:30, and attend the sugaring off pancake breakfast on March 21st. At the [Hudson Highlands Museum](#) in Cornwall, NY (about an hour north of the city) you can go on a 45 minute forest walking tour to learn about the making of maple syrup, weekends through March 21st, 10:30 - 3:00. You can substitute maple syrup for sugar in recipes at home this month, or make an illustrated recipe book with a few maple recipes and include the story of tapping the trees.

On Saturday and Sunday, March 27 and 28, from 1 - 4 pm, [Wave Hill](#) offers a family art project: [The Early Bird Gets into the Mobile](#). Visit these beautiful gardens and mansions in the northwest Bronx and look for the first returning birds and wintering residents. Then make a colorful moving sculpture, free with admission. On Saturdays admission is free until noon, so go early and this workshop will cost you nothing! At home you can make a record of the birds you saw and create a handmade bird identification guide. Check on the internet for the migratory paths of these birds, and shade those areas on a map.

Suggested Reading

[Percy Jackson and the Olympians, by Rick Riordan](#)

This series of books is currently a big hit with ages 9-12. The central hero, Percy, is dyslexic. His learning difference is not portrayed as a liability. Rather, it is celebrated as a quality that helps Percy to think out of the box and come up with creative solutions in his adventures. The background of the book is based on Greek mythology, a favorite focus of Rick Riordan when he was a middle school teacher.

[Adirondack Gold, by Persis Granger](#)

Drawn from stories of local elders, the background of this book about family is rural farm life in upstate New York in the 19th century Adirondacks, with a detailed look at maple sugaring. Recommended for ages 9-12.

[Ininatig's Gift of Sugar: Traditional Native Sugarmaking, by Laura Waterman Wittstock](#)

This is a nonfiction telling of the continuing Native American tradition, for ages 6-12.

[Sugar Snow \(My First Little House\), by Laura Ingalls Wilder and Doris Ettlinger](#)

Adapted from *Little House in the Big Woods*, for the younger set, ages 4-8.

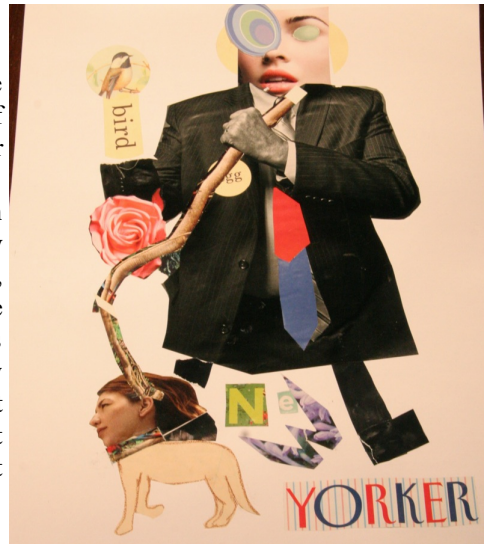
[Backyard Birds \(Peterson Field Guides for Young Naturalists\), by Karen Stray Nolting](#)

A beginner's bird guide for the US and Canada.

Dada and Collage

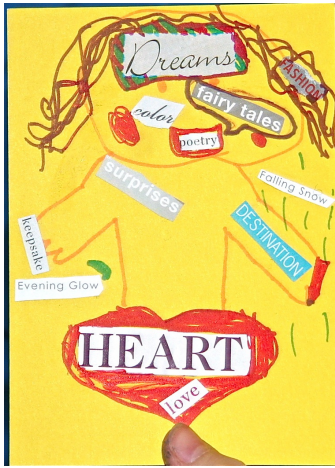
In my art history class on the Dada Movement, we discussed how this movement got its name. A group of artists in Switzerland played a game by slipping a paper knife into a dictionary and seeing which word it touched. Dada means hobby horse in French, uncle or yes-yes in Russian, daddy in English, and seemed an appropriately ridiculous name for an artistic movement that was funny, irreverent, anti-war, anti-government, and even anti-art. We studied a map of Europe and identified the many countries where Dada exhibits occurred. We viewed works by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and others. Then students cut up images from piles of magazines and created Dadaist portrait collages. Adding words turns these works of art into visual poems.

[See more student artwork here.](#)



Dadaist portrait collage by Alexandra

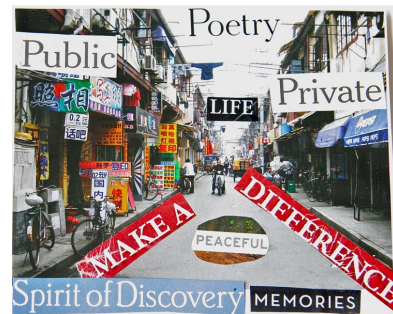
Make a Collage Poem



Take used magazines and newspapers and cut out some interesting words. If there is a particular word that you want, you can type it out on your computer, print it in the size, color and font of your choice, and cut it out to use in your collage. Then find an image for your background. You can use a photograph of a city street or a travel advertisement of an exotic place. Cut out the part of the background image that you want to use (your collage can be large or small). If you like, draw your own background image. Then arrange a handful of carefully selected words. There is no right or wrong way to create art. There is no correct number of words to use in a collage poem, and no wrong way to arrange them. Use as many or as few as you like, and position them in a way that is meaningful to you. Additional images can be applied or drawn as well. This activity teaches language arts (reading and writing) and art (composition and symbolism).

Collage poem by Sophe (being held)

In the collage poem by my student, Sophe, the artist drew a figure as the background image that connected the words. "Dreams" are in the figure's forehead, and "FASHION" is in her hair. "Poetry" is in her mouth, which is saying "fairy tales" in a dialogue bubble. "Poetry Public Private" was made by me. I used a photograph of a street in Shanghai that I cut out of a book catalog. The actual size of this collage is approximately three inches by two inches, designed to fit inside of a small envelope.



[See more collage poems by students.](#)

Poetry Public Private, by Laurie Block Spigel

Quote by Plato

"Do not train children to learning by force and harshness,
but direct them to it by what amuses their minds."

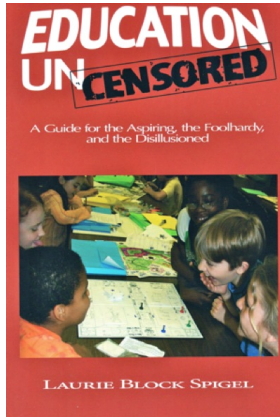
~ Plato, Greek Philosopher, student of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle

[AERO CONFERENCE](#)

Don't miss the [7th annual AERO Conference on Learner-Centered Alternatives](#), June 24-27, 2010, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Albany, NY. Keynote speakers include

John Taylor Gatto and Herbert Kohl. Workshop presenters include Don "Four Arrows" Jacobs, Kirsten Olson, Chris Mercogliano, myself (Laurie Spigel), and many others.

Education Uncensored



Laurie Spigel is a leading educator in the New York City homeschooling community, teaching popular group classes. Her approach is informal, creative, and child-led. Here she shares her innovative ideas and original techniques for every subject. She explains why our current educational system has it all backwards and shows how exciting learning can truly be. A real source of inspiration as well as a practical guide, this is an eye-opening book for every parent and teacher.

Available now at HomeschoolNYC.com

Price: \$12.95 plus shipping & handling

[Read an excerpt.](#)

E-mail comments and suggestions to Laurie@HomeschoolNYC.com.

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