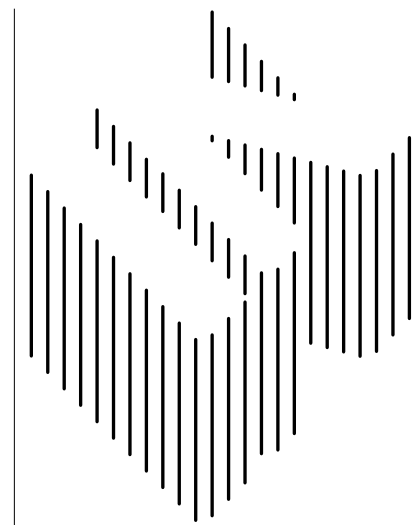# How some secondary schools are setting their students up for success in the creative arts

The CyberARTS computer lab at Don Mills Collegiate Institute. Blakely McAlister, curriculum leader, says he strives to meet the professional standards of post-secondary schools by ensuring CyberARTS students have access to Adobe Creative Cloud.
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2016, WHEN POST-SECONDARY GRADUATES enter the competitive creative job market, they're expected to have not only their arts education behind them, but also a little je ne sais quoi—something that sets them apart. That much was clear in our conversations with top creative pros on what they expect of an intern (p. 28).

Determining exactly what that something is proves tricky. For some students, it means learning in areas outside their main focus of study. For others, it's extracurriculars or personal work. For others still, it's an attempt to have a combination of all of those things. And sometimes it seems that isn't even enough. One successful designer recently told *Applied Arts* that he struggles with junior staff who are every bit as well-rounded as the pros expect them to be (p. 12)—but they're still missing a deep understanding of process. Software, theory, even relevant experience—they have all that, but these juniors can't communicate well with vendors because they don't know how their designs actually get produced.

With so much ground to cover in a post-secondary creative arts education, incoming students are expected to know a lot of these basics. And those that don't end up making their way through their diploma or degree without a tight grasp on what really should be a Design 101 course. So what's a student to do?

Answer: start earlier. While creative arts courses used to be a rarity in the secondary school system, the number of schools offering foundation classes is slowly increasing, thanks to government-sanctioned skills programs and some hardworking, passionate teachers.

Irving Osterer has been teaching graphic design at Ottawa's Merivale High School for 15 of his 35 teaching years and says interest in his courses, approved and partially funded under the Ministry of Education's Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program, has never been higher. "The time is right, because we've had such an explosion of digital and the careers associated with it," he says. "There's more of a demand. Kids are more interested."

Osterer was trained at the former Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University), giving him a unique position in his school board to offer specialized classes. He and a few colleagues cover everything from photography and typography basics to laser etching and 3D printing.

"I'm trying to build for the students a creative inventory of skills that will serve them well when they go post-secondary," Osterer says. "The kinds of things that the kids wouldn't get under normal circumstances—they're getting from us."

Merivale offers the only graphic design SHSM program in Ottawa. Osterer takes his students on field trips to printing presses, art exhibitions and local colleges. He also recently secured a student membership offer from the Association of Registered Graphic Designers (RGD) for his class. "The fact that my students can access that website will mean so much to them," he says. Access to resources, the RGD online community and content from the association's annual student-focused Creative Directions conference number among the benefits.

01
Jenny Owens painted this image of Dan Aykroyd under Irving Osterer's tutelage at Merivale High School. Owens is now studying TV broadcasting at Algonquin College.

02
Student Judy Gu created this brand identity concept in the CyberARTS program, which includes design, image making and motion projects in digital and traditional media.
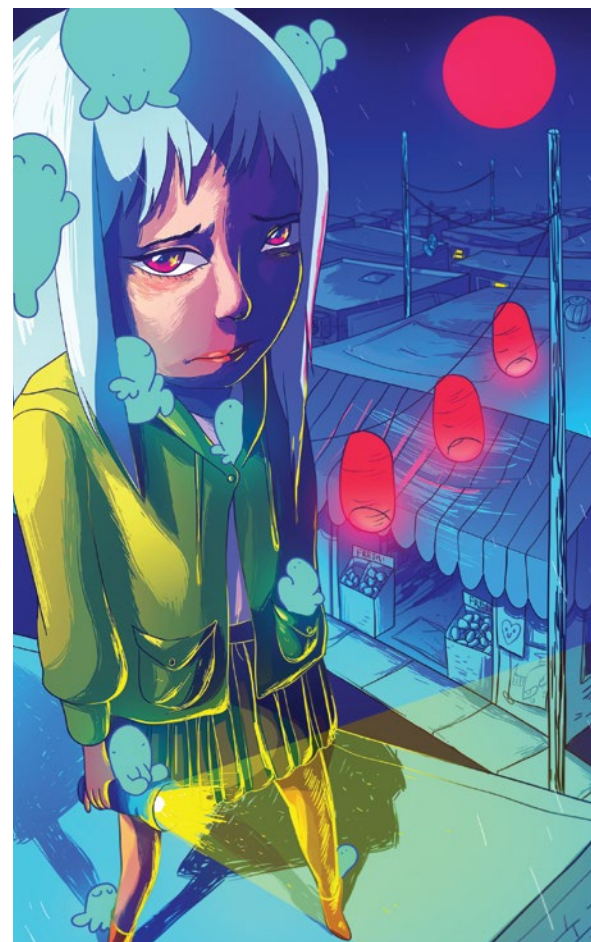
"[Design] is a passion that starts with your first crayon, sticker or pair of scissors to curating an Instagram, Facebook or Tumblr account," says Karen Satok RGD, partner at Sputnik Design Partners and the RGD's VP of Education. "We believe exposing students to the world of design should happen as early as possible. Without the information, students with the appropriate aptitude and passion will not recognize the possibilities that the design world offers them, a world where they may flourish and benefit our profession."

Although with SHSM the onus is on the teachers to prove to administrators that the program would be viable at their school and to drum up the resources to implement it—once they do, students benefit from learning specialized skills outside the traditional curriculum, completing required co-op training and receiving formal recognition in the form of a red seal on their diploma.

Osterer acknowledges that it can be challenging to "convince the powers that be" that SHSM is a worthy investment, and that there are countless art teachers who would like to provide the same kind of training but either don't have the teaching background or the means to do so. Technology changes frequently, and staying up to date is daunting, not to mention expensive. But grant applications and a scrappy attitude can go a long way.

"I tell people in the industry to let me know what they're stuck with, like if they have paper stock they can't move," Osterer says of his resourcefulness. "A printer friend of mine had an order come in for Frisbees, so they stocked them—but the guy who ordered them went bankrupt and left them with 50 Frisbees. So my friend asked if I wanted to do a Frisbee project with my class. You make lemonade."

Osterer says he hopes getting the word out about the availability and success of these programs will help convince more principals to consider them for their own schools. The opportunity for hands-on learning is invaluable, and appeals to students regardless of their socioeconomic status. In fact, there is a strong correlation between higher academic achievement and the availability of arts education, particularly in students from lower-income families, according to a 2011 report prepared by U.S. advisory group President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Osterer says he's had several students from alternative schools come to Merivale for his program, which inevitably leads to a transformation in both attitude and aptitude as the students find what they'd been missing in their education all along.

"By providing this kind of option in high schools, what's the very worst that can happen?" Osterer asks. "Students do it and they find out it's not for them? That's cool; that's great. If they can find out before [paying tuition at college], it's a good thing."

David McCreary and his wife, Danielle Curtis, run the digital media program at Brantford Collegiate Institute in Brantford, a 90-minute drive southwest from Toronto. He says the sooner teachers can reach the students, the better prepared they are for their continuing education and even their careers.

His program offers photography, video and graphic design streams, which all use the Adobe Creative Suite on new iMacs installed in time for the fall school season ("Most teachers I know aren't so lucky," he says of his windfall). Curtis acquired the school's digital SLR and video cameras through a Future Shop grant she applied for several years ago.

"It's really nice for the students to learn the software, so when they do get to post-secondary, they've already got the basics," says McCreary. "Some of my students are only in grade 10 and it's great to imprint on them early to get those concepts down."

At Don Mills Collegiate Institute in Toronto, the multidisciplinary CyberARTS program recognizes creative potential through artistic and technological opportunities. The students use Adobe Creative Cloud to explore things like desktop publishing, web design and 3D printing.

05
Blakely McAlister at Don Mills Collegiate Institute stresses the importance of portfolio development to his students. CyberARTS student James Long won a Student Award (p. 103) for this portrait.

06
Student Award winners Wendy Zhang (top; p. 104) and Andy Zhang (bottom; p. 104) are enrolled in the CyberARTS program. "These four years are a very creative time," says McAlister. "It is really cool to watch."

03
CyberARTS students were quick to enter our new high school category in the Student Awards, and several won, including this piece by Lina Wu (p. 102)..

04
Grade 11 student Caelin Mackie at Brantford Collegiate Institute created this vector portrait of actor David Tennant.

Blakely McAlister, CyberARTS curriculum leader, says, "The creative thinking, the problem solving and the technical skills the students learn really set them up for any industry. We're trying to give them a foundation of creativity, which I think any discipline needs—whether you're a doctor or within the creative arts."

While his students move on to a wide range of post-secondary programs, what impresses McAlister most about all of them is their seemingly effortless adaptability. "They're very fluid; it's innate to them. And they're fearless with technology. There's no resistance to it at all," he says.

McCreary echoes that the transferable skills are worth the investment alone, even if the student isn't necessarily going to follow up with a post-secondary focus on the creative arts. "They go out into the workforce and know how to put together a website, how to lay something out, how to design a logo or business card. Or if they need to produce a promotional video, they have the skills to do that, even if that's not the focus of the business they're working for," he says.

Those creative soft skills are part of the "well-rounded" quality that employers are looking for in new hires, no matter the industry. But for those who plan to stick with the creative arts throughout their schooling careers, high school offers the freedom to try, fail and explore—all with a lot less pressure. And sometimes, the infrequent technology turnover that high schools face allows for a deeper focus on traditional media.

Irving Osterer at Merivale High School emphasizes the importance of craft in his classes. Every year he invites the proprietor of Ottawa's Weathervane Press to his class to work with wood type, shows his students how their artwork needs to be manipulated for silkscreen printing, and maintains a working dark room. He says that not only do the kids enjoy learning the process, but it also makes them better artists.

"You send a student out with a digital camera and they come back in an hour with 700 pictures. You send a kid out with a roll of 24, and they think a hell of a lot more about composition and all the things that make a great picture before they click that shutter. Because they only have 24 chances to do it right," he says.

Finding the balance between traditional and new media processes and the students' attention spans is what keeps them engaged. David Bromley, graphic design professor at Algonquin College, regularly helps Osterer assess the gaps in the SHSM program to better prepare students for college. "He said more of his students are interested in animation. So we're doing more of that," notes Osterer. "If this is the reality, that's the way we go." Osterer also works to keep the curriculum current, including pop culture or movie-themed projects whenever possible. "I try to keep head as close as I can to their vernacular," he says. "Because if they're learning typography, they're learning typography. They should be able to learn it in a way that's relevant to them."

Osterer's approach helps to foster a passion for the work early on—another key component of those intangible qualities that employers seek—and it's one he shares with David McCreary at Brantford Collegiate and Blakely McAlister at Don Mills Collegiate.

"For the students who are really focused on getting into one of those media-based areas, it is so nice that we can give them a bit of a jump start," says McCreary. "The students of mine who were serious about pursuing these avenues as a career were able to do it."

For McAlister, giving students the best tools for success in the post-secondary world and readying them for viable careers is what high school is all about. "The students are exposed to the design process that they'll experience throughout the rest of their schooling career. They go through the process of getting feedback, getting the final," he says. "These four years really prepare them for that, and for life outside of school."