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Flynn dance instructor teaches on-your-game art

Words Come Alive! curriculum has school teachers learning hip-hop steps

Lois Trombley, a Burlington dancer and choreographer, shows teachers at the Integrated Arts Academy some hip-hop dance moves. / SALLY POLLAK/FREE PRESS

Free Press Staff Writer



Words came alive Wednesday afternoon at Integrated Arts Academy when people stopped talking and started dancing.

That's what happened when Lois Trombley, a Burlington dancer and choreographer, took over a staff workshop at the arts magnet school in the Old North End.

Under Trombley's tutelage, discussion of concepts like building community, exposing kids to art, and "awakening of the soul," sprung to high-energy life. And clear comprehension.

Trombley led about 30 staff members, mostly teachers, off the floor and onto their feet.

Co-creator of Spielpalast Cabaret, Trombley was at IAA in her capacity as a dance teacher at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. She led a workshop designed to help teachers prepare for a schoolwide trip to the Flynn, where next month the school's 280 students will see a performance by the Washington D.C.-based dance troupe Step Afrika!

(Full disclosure: my daughter takes dance classes with Trombley.)

The Wednesday workshop started with a discussion of the value to students of seeing the performing arts. Teachers also talked about how to use a particular show as part of their curriculum.

Trombley talked briefly about the history of step, noting its connection to jazz and hip hop. She focused for a moment on hip-hop's origins in youth culture.

“It’s a street form,” Trombley said. “There’s a sense of pride, of self-respect and accountability. It’s about showing up, being on your game.”

Before the dancing started — and it turned pretty quickly into on-your-game art — Trombley added her ideas to the discussion of kids seeing live performances. She called the students at IAA, where her daughter is a second-grader, “little artists.”

“When you see art you’re inspired to create art, or to better your art,” Trombley said. “You’re a witness ... There’s tremendous value in students seeing teachers as artists, and as learners and students.”

Teachers became quick learners as Trombley led them in a series of street-dance moves, and call and response movement exercises: Trombley stepped in a certain rhythm and played percussion on her thighs; the teachers repeated her moves

The group formed a circle, within which teachers took turns soloing. The solo dancer chose the next soloist, making the selection known by dancing up to him or her. These moves were, by turn, slinky, tough, sly, bold, inventive. People in the surrounding circle were alert, energized, entertained: clapping and cheering.

Suddenly, class had gone five minutes past its allotted time.

“It’s 3:35,” Trombley said to her sweating students. “Thank you so much. This was an honor for me to be here today.”

As teachers left the classroom, principal Bobby Riley made his own little call and response.

“I guarantee you,” Riley said, “no one else’s professional development was anything like that today.”

“Yeah!” came a kind of group response, expressed in various sounds and styles.

On Halloween, led by kindergartners, students and teachers from Integrated Arts Academy will walk from school to the Flynn to watch Step Afrika! perform. They will witness the show with more than 1,000 other students.

“My dream of what could happen is there is a dance involved,” Trombley said of the upcoming field trip. “What if each class created their own step? That’s just my lofty idea.”