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## EXHIBITION AS CURRICULUM

-Scott Sikkema, CAPE Program Director, October 2004

In recent years, CAPE has evolved a practice termed “exhibition as curriculum.” This approach accomplishes two critical goals for CAPE: it brings teachers, artists, and students into the process of conceptualizing and mounting an exhibition, and, in doing so, the exhibition acknowledges the artistic and intellectual importance of arts integration work produced through collaboration by teachers, artists, and students.

It is CAPE’s belief that the old paradigms and hierarchies of art production and art presentation are largely antiquated in our contemporary, global culture. This belief is not new; it is often advanced by members of the contemporary art world in many venues and forums. Despite this, little work presented at sites for contemporary art comes from collaboration. Moreover, most collaborative work coming from a community base that is shown still tends to place the artist on a pedestal as a “Pied Pier” that leads community participants to the artist’s magic world of art-land. For this reason, much collaborative work bares the heavy stamp of the artist’s concept above all; collaborative participants too often “fill in between the lines.”

CAPE rejects this notion. It is our belief that in a true collaboration between teachers, students, and artists, intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration come equally from all quarters. It is essential to view teachers, students, and artists all as creators of culture. Together, as culture creators, they are producing much of the most provocative and intriguing contemporary art done today.

The “exhibition as curriculum” approach has been a key development for CAPE in promoting teachers, artists, and students as *creators of culture*. This approach is deliberately intended to move the presentation of collaborative, arts-integrated work beyond the typical student display, or art fair. From the beginning, teachers and artists (and students) from more than one school are brought into the process of conceptualizing an exhibition. What questions are there? What ideas are exciting? How might the art explore and challenge these ideas? How does what is being explored at one school interact with what is being explored at another? How will work be displayed? What kinds of documentation will illuminate the work? What relationships will deepen across schools at the exhibition? As teachers, artists, and students answer these questions and more, they take on a curatorial role for the exhibition. This strengthens the exhibition itself, because it more fully represents the practice going on at the schools, and thus more fully represents the importance of the work being made.

CAPE began its exhibition-as-curriculum practice in school year 1998/1999, with *Spiritual Passports/ Transformative Journeys*, followed *Chicago Schools Quilts: A Millennium Project* in 1999/2000, then *Indivisible: Stories of Chicago Communities* in school year 2000/2001, and *Exchanging Symbols* in 2001/2002. An important component of exhibition-as-curriculum is the proper and empowering exhibition space; a professional space embodies the respect due the work. For these exhibitions, the following institutions hosted: The School of the Art Institute Gallery 2, The State of Illinois Art Gallery; The Kraft Education Center at The Art Institute of Chicago; University of Illinois Gallery 400; Beacon Street Gallery; and The Terra Museum of American Art.

As CAPE moves the exhibition-as-curriculum practice forward, many ideas for potential exhibitions are developing. To advance the practice further, it is CAPE’s desire to expand the amount of documentation on teacher, artist, and student thinking available and on display, to have work on display for substantial time periods, and to produce accompanying workshops and seminars, and most importantly, a catalogue that respectfully and beautifully represents student, educator, and artist processes, methodologies, and products.