



excerpts from

# Creative Minds in Medicine

a cleveland creative intersection

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COMMUNITY  
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# case study

cleveland museum of natural history



Melissa Duy, Health Education Coordinator  
Photo courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History

# banishing boredom

At the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, dull health classes are not allowed.

Young children learn about their five senses from puppet plays and dental health from brushing the teeth of Mr. Bigmouth, a working model of a jaw. Others play along with “Disease Detectives,” a mystery-story video that contains clues for them to discover the ways illnesses start and spread. Humor helps teens lose their discomfort with the names of body parts. And vivid imagery acts like mental refrigeration, keeping lessons fresh in all the students’ heads.

There’s an art to jazzing up health information so kids remember it. In fact, there’s any number of arts to it and Lee Gambol practices many of them. As the museum’s distance-learning coordinator and science instructor, she uses her theater and biology backgrounds to turn learning into memorable fun for young people in Northeast Ohio and beyond.

What works for kids, Gambol says, is not just watching, but doing. And drawing has special appeal.

“There’s something fascinating and magical about someone’s pencil going across the board,” she explains. “The process of communicating by imagery is very powerful.”

Children will watch an artist sketching bacteria shapes, rapt. But then they want to try it for themselves. “And that’s what they take home, their drawings,” Gambol notes.

For that reason, getting students to take home information in their heads as well as in their hands has become a process that’s as creative for the children as for their health instructors at the museum. Says Health Education Coordinator Melissa Duy, art as part of the learning experience “is something that just makes it unique and different.”

She thinks children remember Bob the “blind” puppet better than they would a teacher just talking about sight. And they absorb a lesson about effective washing better when they get to cover their hands first

Because health is “ever-evolving,” the content of classes and the methods used to present it have to change, too.



Skeletal display, Cleveland Museum of Natural History  
Photo by CPAC



Bob the "blind" puppet  
Photo by CPAC

with colored powder that sticks to the places where bacteria have gathered.

Gambol uses herself as an example: Though she likes teaching, she was a somewhat unenthusiastic student because "sitting and listening is not my bag." A drawer of dragons as a child and a professional puppeteer as a young adult, Gambol found she enjoyed the technical backstage work of theater more than performing and wanted to do something that involved science. She ended up working at the Great Lakes Science Center for four years, then joining the touring "Mr. Wizard" show and brought that sensibility – "doing all these crazy 'Mr. Wizard' things, blowing stuff up" – to HealthSpace Cleveland, a health museum and educational organization that was the first in the area to undertake video-conferencing and distance-learning.

When HealthSpace merged with the natural-history museum in 2007, Gambol came along, bringing her arts-based teaching techniques with her. She and her colleagues in the museum education department now reach almost 76,000 students: nearly 45,000 through school programs held at the museum and over 31,000 through in-school or distance-learning outreach programming.

Now, Gambol uses camera angles and video story-telling to banish boredom from museum classes, abetted by colleagues with their own scientific knowledge and artistic skills, including a digital-animation wielding physiologist and Duy, whose master's degree in public health and sense of humor help teens discover the comedy in puberty. Her class "Growing Up and Liking It" takes a straightforward and scientific but amused approach to the official terms for body parts, as well as their nicknames, she says, which allows young people gradually to become comfortable using the proper ones.

"That's my favorite class, just watching that transformation," Duy says.

Because health is "ever-evolving," she adds, the content of classes and the methods used to present it have to change, too. So whether a new prop is needed or recent studies demand new instructions for elementary-school hygiene students, creativity and effective re-design stay important to the museum's education department.



Reproductive system display, Cleveland Museum of Natural History  
Photo by CPAC

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To the students, too: Taking part and making art are always the keys to student interest in any lesson, Gambol says. “All of our programs rely heavily on the student volunteer standing up and taking part. Part of that artistic process of learning is, ‘Don’t push that button, I want to push it myself’ . . . the idea of ‘Can I make that noise?’ Everybody here draws on the chalkboard constantly.”

So it’s not unusual for museum classes to be overtaken by, say, weird beeping as kids try to imitate the sound of a school fire alarm. Or by silence, as children examine an animal skull and then draw pictures of its teeth, reinforcing their memories by turning them to art. Or by hilarity, when Gambol plays stand-up comic and challenges a class of teenagers to consider how darned odd she feels, talking about private parts to roomful of perfect strangers.

“When you’re talking to a bunch of high-schoolers about STDs . . . you have to laugh about it,” she says matter-of-factly. “Laughing is a safe bond. And they’re going to laugh at you, anyway – better to give them permission.”



Lee Gambol teaching “Just Senseless,” a distance learning course  
Photo by CPAC

## About the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture

CPAC is a nonprofit with a mission to strengthen, unify and connect greater Cleveland's arts and culture. Research is a core component of our work, and one of many ways we support arts and culture. CPAC provides counsel related to public policy that benefits the sector and the broader community. It provides a number of tools through [cultureforward.org](http://cultureforward.org) and [mycreativecompass.org](http://mycreativecompass.org) for arts and culture professionals and those who would like to engage with them. CPAC also carries out a variety of programs and services that help build the sector's organizational and business practices to support a vibrant, thriving greater Cleveland. [www.cultureforward.org](http://www.cultureforward.org)

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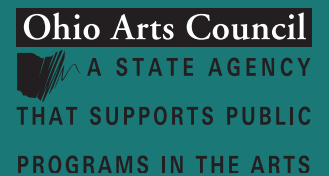


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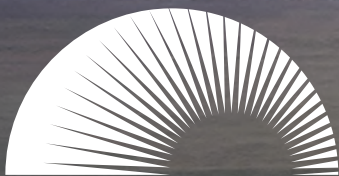


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