



# **COLLABORATIVE WALL COLLECTIONS SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTIONS**



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*The Collaborative Wall Collections project, based on the mural design methods of Bernard Williams, was presented by him to the Contemporary Community Curriculum Workshop in February 2000.*

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**T**he Collaborative Wall Collections project is a powerful tool for investigating and presenting thematic material to the school community. It's an ideal way to integrate artmaking into other areas of the curriculum. Students consider symbolic and diagrammatic forms of representation, experiment with the effect that the juxtaposition of images has on the creation of meaning, and experience the sense of accomplishment, community, and communication that comes from creating a large scale dramatic piece. The effort to impact ratio for this project is excellent--a few dollars in art supplies and a week of class time gives art students and the entire school community a vivid experience in reshaping the visual environment.

This project involves the display and arrangement of individual elements, created or collected, by members of the collaborative group. The elements brought to the group become the material out of which the final work is constructed.

A central concept to this activity is the collecting of information. The bits of information are condensed into some kind of symbolic form and then added to the information brought by the other participants. The symbols are then arranged in a format determined by the group or leader. The project gives each student an opportunity to make a valued contribution to the group. In the arranging stage, it encourages the formation of a community of creators.



## **Artistic Concepts and Skills**

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1. Students explore symbols and diagrams as visual language.
2. Students simplify visual information to create graphic impact.
3. Students practice cutting clean edges with scissors or x-acto knives.
4. Students collaboratively experiment with composition and arrangement strategies.
5. Students learn to be open to surprise meanings generated by unexpected juxtapositions.
6. Students learn that art is risktaking. It's not possible to know the outcome before the process is engaged.

## **Lesson Plan**

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### **COLLECTING OF INFORMATION**

Begin by focusing students on collecting information that pertains to the theme. This can be the result of a class discussion or the teacher can begin with a work plan that assigns preliminary research assignments to individuals or groups.

For the UIC Contemporary Community Curriculum American History Wall Collections mural, we began by assigning each group a period of American history. Each participant listed important events and themes for that time and arrived in class with books and xeroxes to use as pictorial resources.

*\* There is an American History Wall Collections worksheet file for downloading in the Process chapter.*

### **CREATING SYMBOLS**

Very elaborate information may be brought to the group. Large quantities of information may result. This is good. This is the nature of our world and the result of many people

gathering information. The overall look of the final product should suggest the complexity of the subject matter.

However, some condensation of information is necessary. Here the creation of symbols comes into play. A symbol is a simplified expression of a complex idea or meaning. The information is retained, but not immediately apparent. Such is the nature of the symbol. Symbols can be very beautiful and complex, yet simultaneously simple and elegant.

Show students examples of successful symbolizations. Discuss the difference between standard symbols (such as a heart meaning love) and freshly generated symbols. Choose one or two complex concepts and engage the class in brainstorm sketching. Have students share their visual solutions and discuss the effectiveness of the communication.

Limitation is an important tool for creating a visually dynamic piece. For the American History Wall Collections Mural, we requested that all the symbols measure 24" high. The width could vary considerably, but we wanted to create



uniform rows of 24” as an organizing device. Sometimes people don’t follow this guideline. You may wish to have participants redo symbols to a standard size or you may be open to including more varied sizes.

It is helpful to give students xeroxes from books that show examples of pictorial symbols and silhouettes. Dover Books publishes many useful and inexpensive books of this sort. Here’s several to look for:

*Handbook of Pictorial Symbols* by Rudolf Modley

*African Designs from Traditional Sources* by  
Geoffery Williams

*Design Motifs of Ancient Mexico* by Jorge Enciso

Dover Books can be ordered on-line at:

<http://store.yahoo.com/doverpublications/index.html3>.

One technique that works well is to sketch the design onto the paper, cut out, and then flip the paper and use the clean side (without the pencil sketching) for display. This only works if it doesn’t matter if the image is reversed.

## **REVIEW SYMBOLS**

Lay out symbols. Discuss. Are there missing elements in the theme? Are symbols clear and specific? If necessary, improve the design of some symbols. If necessary, create additional symbols. Sometimes it may also be necessary to do additional research at this stage.

## **MOUNT DISPLAY**

Layout display on floor in front of the wall. Experiment with different arrangements. Consider the meanings created by the overall collection and organization. Consider whether the

juxtaposition of certain elements generates new or unexpected meanings.

Restructure (and possibly add new symbols) if necessary to complete the intended meanings of the piece.

In order to have rows of images on the wall appear straight and crisp, it helps to have temporary guidelines. Determine the height of the bottom of each row. Attach a string to this point with a pushpin. Stretch the string across the wall. Use a level to check level. Attach other end of string with a pin. You now have a clear guideline for the students to use in hanging the work that can be quickly removed at the end of the installation.

Affix images to the wall. Depending on the surface use map pins, staples, or tape rings. It sometimes helps to use tape to temporarily hold images in place and then when their final placement is determined use staples or pins.

## **OTHER POSSIBLE THEMES:**

This method can be used to investigate and make public displays for many themes. Other suggested themes include explorations of local history or a history mural focusing on a theme such as civil rights or Mexican American history. Science themes such as solar systems or threats to the earth’s ecological systems also work well. A middle school teacher in the CCC planned to use the format to do a mural that supported her school’s health and nutrition curriculum. The possibilities are unlimited. Consider creating a Wall Collections Mural on a different theme each year.



# MATERIALS

## For Collaborative Wall Collections

A basic Wall Collections mural can be created using only a single color of construction paper, scissors, and pushpins. More complex versions of the project can make use of colored paper backgrounds or of additional colors in the symbols to signify other meanings. A temporary Wall Collections Mural can also serve as the basis for designing a permanent mural. (See Variation 1 for an example of a permanent outdoor mural.)

- 1.** A clean, blank wall.
- 2.** Construction paper--18" by 24" black construction paper. (If available, also 24" by 36" black construction paper is useful for creating larger forms.)
- 3.** Pins, tacks, staples, or masking tape for mounting symbols.
- 4.** Masking tape--for connecting pieces of paper to create larger images.
- 5.** Scissors or x-acto knives and cutting mats.
- 6.** Resource images--books, encyclopedias, magazines, internet.
- 7.** Level, yardstick, string.