



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

## Young Enthusiasm: Teaching Tapestry in Schools

Lynda Brothers

*Editorial Comment (Barb Brophy): The preservation of tapestry as an art form relies on passing the tradition and skills to the next generation. This article is written by two tapestry instructors who teach children the skill of tapestry and cultivate within them the passion for tapestry as a form of artistic expression. The nuts and bolts of teaching by grade level are shared by Lynda Brothers and the critical roles of the “grandmother” tapestry weaver and community involvement in passing on the tradition are discussed by Thoma Ewen.*

### **Teaching Tapestry in the Elementary Grades**



*“K – 2, weaving introduction” on Cardboard Notched Loom,” 13”h X 8”w, 4 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers.*

I have been teaching tapestry to adults for almost 50 years, both in the United States and in South Africa, where I lived for seven years. Teaching children in grades K-8 in a school environment has been a very different, enjoyable, and rewarding challenge. I have found there are age specific projects within the school curriculum that enhance the learning experience and enthusiasm for tapestry.

In 1994 I was approached by an adult tapestry student of mine, a principal of a Los Angeles public elementary school, to see if I might be interested in teaching weaving and possibly tapestry to her classes, K-5. Before that time, I had only taught weaving as a volunteer in my own young son’s 2nd grade class. It was quite a daunting task as I would be mostly alone with 20 to 25 students for 45–50-minute classes throughout the day, moving from grade to grade. After the first year of trial and error with class management and age-appropriate learning possibilities, I was approached by a parent association of another school who had heard about my classes and wanted me to teach at their school as well. Since then, I have taught weaving and tapestry during the school year and at summer camps that were privately organized or in public schools or art centers. The students

include kindergarten age through high school children, as well as adults (including teacher training classes). I have also been the all-around art teacher in those schools, camps, and art centers.

There are several talking points to encourage administrations to include weaving and tapestry:

- include the program within the art classes;
- include hands-on weaving and tapestry within the cultural and history scholastic classes;
- include tapestry with math and computer classes;
- integrate all classes through a weaving and tapestry unit;
- the program helps to promote focus, patience, and perseverance;
- the program is beneficial for students with special needs;
- the program has a small material cost.

In the school system I start the K-2 grades with a basic notched cardboard loom. Weaving is done with a 6" plastic needle using various yarns, metallic fibers, and textured materials, including found natural elements such as thin bamboo sticks, bark from trees, other plant forms, large feathers (Peacock eyes are great sticking out of the selvedge edge!), leather strips, fabric strips, paper strips with words, and anything else that adds texture and color. I also bring in examples of different fibers, e.g. cotton plants, samples of many different animal fibers, silk and silk worms, etc. and explain where they come from. When I am sure that students understand what they are doing, the looms stay in the classrooms. Teachers find it beneficial to allow students who are finished with other work to reward them with free time on the looms. I usually display the students' final weavings on the cardboard looms, so they are stretched and somewhat framed by the background of the loom itself, which is sometimes decorated as well in art class.



*"3rd grade tapestry," 9"h X 8"w, 6 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers*

By the third grade the students know how to keep their edges straighter, how to join wefts together, and are proficient in the under/over rhythm and focus. They also know what warp and weft are and what weft-faced weaving is, as compared to plain weave and warp-faced weaving. That's when I change the looms so that they can progress with a more efficient and more mechanical loom. I have designed a simple, inexpensive frame loom 18" wide by 22" tall with a heddle stick that can be used year after year and can easily be stored in the classroom during the 6 to 8 weeks that the weaving projects usually last in each class. In one school I made over 120 of these looms that

were then used for over 15 years. The loom has also doubled as a frame for teaching silk painting (using a quarter yard of silk) and in other art projects.

By third grade I start talking to students about tapestry and the history of tapestry in other cultures, with slide shows, samples, and pictures of some of my tapestries with my 15-foot-wide loom. I also demonstrate how to make different simple shapes with slits and simple pick and pick. To demonstrate I find it best to use an open warp technique so that the shape can be concentrated on without thinking about background or negative space. (See photo below.) Using math and symmetry, counting warps and wefts, drawing the image on graph paper, transferring images to computers in their other classes, and talking about pixels, etc. integrates the project to other aspects in their education. This also coincides with a discussion about the history of Navajo weavings, kilims, Persian carpet designs, etc.

*"3rd grader's loom with shapes," 22"h X 18" w, 6 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers*

*Leaving warp threads unwoven with an open warp technique allows the students to concentrate on the forms and not the joins.*

In one school I pushed for an extra project for a 3rd grade class with a very encouraging teacher. The class held a competition. Each student designed a 2' x 3' tapestry weaving that showed a basic cultural living environment. All of the students created paintings that they thought would be simple to weave. One design was chosen by voting and for the next several months, once a week, I arrived and pulled 3 to 4 students at a time out of class to weave the full tapestry, which ended up being hung permanently in the auditorium. The students in that class were very proud! And I was so thankful that the teacher knew how important this learning experience was for his students.

In fourth grade, using the same small heddle loom, I teach how to warp the loom using a figure 8 warping, make continuous heddles on the heddle stick, start the weaving, and design a simple design. I talk about what makes a design too complex, as students want to go all out, but then get discouraged if it is too difficult. It's important to get them to design something that is simple enough to be finished in the time allowed so that there is a feeling of accomplishment. Simple designs are so much more rewarding when they are completed! Again, slit technique for straight vertical lines, etc. are used.

Fourth graders are able to help me warp looms for the third-grade classes. I often have after school volunteer times with fourth graders to help me warp all of the looms for the students in the 3rd grade. Volunteer parents and teachers who want to learn also join in. At this point some parents (and teachers) purchase extra looms to have at home for their children or for their own projects. I am often approached by parents, teachers, and members of the administration to teach classes after school. One of my after-school classes included a school secretary who finished a beautiful tapestry that she entered into a competition in her synagogue where it won a first-place award. The tapestry was then displayed in a show in Washington D.C. This was woven on the same loom that I use with the students. I use the same loom for beginning adult tapestry students, which they can use later to sample techniques, warp sett, and weft blends.



*"Fifth grade sampler," 10"h x 7"w, 6 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers*

Fifth grade students (and older) who have had the past grade weaving experiences, are able to progress with their designs, weft interlock techniques, color blending, use of texture, etc. One of the most popular designs that fifth graders weave is their name. If that is their passion I have them weave it sideways, in "bubble" letters, with slit technique and a border. They draw the design in a cartoon first. If they aren't interested in weaving their name, I encourage them to weave a simple landscape, abstract shape, or a graphic Navajo inspired design. They can also come to me for other ideas for simple tapestry designs, in line with the possibilities, expertise, and time constraints of the project.



*"Summer Camp, learning shapes," 8"h X 6"w, 6 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers.*

*"Summer Camp, younger group," 11"h X 6"w, 6 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers.*

In summer camp I have a time limitation and a mixture of age levels. I use simple weaving with texture and found natural elements for the weaving, except with the older children, who I encourage to weave a simple image.



*"Middle School, tapestry technique sampler," 7"h x 8"w, 6 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers.*

*"Middle School, small tapestry," 8"h x 9"w, 8 epi, photo: Lynda Brothers.*

Middle school students progress to weaving a sampler of techniques and then they design a small tapestry using at least 2 of those techniques, integrating principles and elements of design. The looms can go home with the students, which allows more time for completion. I often see students with their looms outside at lunch or after school weaving together. Weaving is frequently listed as the favorite art project during a school year and when I see students years later, weaving and tapestry are enthusiastically brought up in our conversation. Hands on weaving classes are a great way to create a generation of students with a love and appreciation of contemporary tapestry and other fiber arts.

### ***Artist-in-the-Schools Projects***

***By Thoma Ewen, Moon Rain Centre, Gatineau Hills, North of Ottawa, CANADA***



*“Children working in pairs,” photo: Moon Rain Centre. In Moon Rain Centre’s artist-in-the-schools projects, the children work in pairs, helping each other to warp their individual frame looms, keep the tension and tie the knots.*

In a Navajo creation myth Spider Woman, the creator spirit, stretched out a warp on the four directions and wove the Earth into being.

She then made First Woman and First Man and because she was so pleased with all her creations, she gave the gift of weaving to First Woman. Weaving has remained unchanged over millennia. The basic structure of weave that we call tabby or plain weave is the same as basic tapestry weaving technique. Basic weaving technique is the same everywhere, in all cultures on our planet. It is universal – a common thread that connects all cultures and all humans, through cloth and clothing and through woven art.



*"Younger classes weave simple colour bands of plain weaving," photo: Moon Rain Centre.*

The ancient symbol for both water and for life is an undulating line, like a series of connected sine waves. In tapestry weaving this undulating line is the path the weft follows through the warp threads. It flows. There is a subtle fluidity in woven structure that relates it to all of life in its very form. The weft passes over and under the warp, moving from right to left, and returns, moving under and over from left to right. Every movement is followed by its opposite. While weaving, this constant repetition of one movement followed by its opposite, generates a balancing of left and right brain activities. It has a harmonizing effect on the weaver that is then transmitted to the viewer. This harmonizing, balancing effect is what the Navajos call being in "the beauty place" of weaving, the

place of peace.

This peaceful, harmonizing effect is most visible when working with children during my Artist-in-the-Schools projects. When given a brief demonstration, frame looms, warp and weft, a class of hyper-active children is transformed into intent and dedicated weavers. When I tell them that weaving puts more peace and beauty back into the world, they don't want to stop. They weave with purpose and integrity and a mission. Peace and harmony are real necessities, very real, and children understand this.





*"A young student experiments with form and design," photo: Moon Rain Centre*

It only takes minutes for children of all ages to learn basic tapestry weaving technique. Kids understand tension when I point out the flowing sine wave path of the weft as it travels through the warp. They love it when I tell them that this sine

wave pattern is the ancient symbol for life and for flowing water. They understand the concept of building straight edges. Weaving is part of our genetic cultural memory. It's a totally natural creative activity for most of us.

In an Artists-in-the-Schools project that lasted several days, a Grade 5 girl returned to class on the second day with a small wooden frame loom that her grandfather had made for her the evening before. On the third day she returned with a completed weaving and announced: "Now I know I will never be alone." She had made a big and important discovery in tapestry weaving, a discovery that is deeper than craft, deeper than enjoyment and pleasure in creative expression. The teacher and I both smiled and said "wonderful" to the girl, and then looked at each other and turned away to wipe the little tears that had welled up. There are often special things that happen when working with kids in schools. Sometimes the less privileged can take the most from us as teachers. Truly, it is such a privilege to have something to give – something that every once in a while, can make a difference to a child's future.



*“Collective project in a school,”  
photo: Jamie Cruickshank. We set  
up the loom so that weaving can be  
done on both the front and back  
sides of the loom, in order to  
facilitate participation of all the  
students in the school.*

In our museums, community centers, and in our schools, tapestry weaving is re-emerging as a contemporary art medium. Tapestry

exhibitions are once again being presented. Community tapestry projects are bringing people together to collaborate in dynamic creative ways. People feel the energy of weave, and sense the flow of weave, and the peace that this medium imparts. It is a new and gentle form of intercultural community activism. A finished community tapestry, installed in a public location, continues to transmit to viewers the messages of harmony, community, beauty, and peace. It becomes a public icon for community building. The contemporary tapestry weaver is able to actively and publicly share the ancient wisdom of this timeless art and craft. See [http://moonrain.ca/community\\_tapestry.html](http://moonrain.ca/community_tapestry.html) for more information.



*“An iconic photograph from a  
collective project in a school,”  
photo: Jamie Cruickshank.*

All ancient cultures understood the unique and important role of the grandmother, the role of teacher, the transmitter of knowledge. As a group of tapestry artists of a certain age, we have the privilege of carrying the knowledge of our art and craft, and we

need to take the responsibility of sharing it, to make sure that tapestry has a future. We must actively become the “grandmothers” of our craft – embracing the idea that we are transmitting our art medium to the children of our culture, who are the future of tapestry. We can’t wait for school boards and ministries of education to create budgets to fund creative programs in our public schools. The days of adequately-funded arts programming in schools in which I worked as a young adult in the 1970s and 1980s have disappeared. We need to take the initiative to re-establish these programs and activities, as individual creative members of our communities. We need to become creative community activists.



*“Thoma demonstrates weaving to a class,” 2012, photo: Gabby Ewen. During a collective project in a school, each class in the school has one period to work on the project.*

At a conference on arts and education in Ottawa, the keynote speaker stated that the leading experts in education the world over are all in agreement that the curriculum, presently organized with science and mathematics as the top priorities and with the creative arts at the bottom, should actually be completely reversed, putting the creative arts at the top – because right now, we need creative thinking to solve the world’s problems.

urge tapestry artists everywhere to start noon-hour or after-school tapestry weaving activities in your local public school or community center. Engaged parents and community members will help by making small wooden frame looms, even recycled picture frames will do. Many grandmothers have full yarn baskets and are happy to donate yarns. Ask for yarn donations and an abundance of materials will appear. Funding will come.

Weaving is intangible cultural heritage. Wade Davis, author of *One River* has expressed the frightening reality that cultures are disappearing faster than species on our planet. By teaching tapestry weaving to children, you will be passing on the basics of this timeless technique to a

new generation. You will be putting the word “weaving” back into the vocabulary. You will be transmitting a love and a passion. You will be opening a door to art and craft and to creative self-expression, and you may even make a lasting positive impression in a child’s life. When you teach tapestry, you are transmitting your love for tapestry. What could be more rewarding and enriching?



*“Each student in the school weaves The Vision Weave Project” 2012. photograph: Moon Rain Centre  
Four tapestry banners were collectively woven by all the students in the school. Each student also wrote a vision for the future onto a ribbon and interwove it into one of the tapestry banners. The Vision Weave Project banners are now permanently installed in the school.*

### **Authors’ Bylines**

**Lynda Brothers** is an American tapestry artist and has been weaving and designing tapestries for almost 50 years. She has owned studio/galleries in Aspen, Colorado; Taos, New Mexico; Cape Town, South Africa; Ojai, California; and presently has her studio in Moorpark, California, where she works on and teaches tapestry, silk painting, marbling on fabric and other surface

design techniques. For the past 20 years Lynda has taught weaving and art to children at Colfax Elementary School in North Hollywood, California, Fernangeles Elementary in Sunland, California, and the Chinese School in Thousand Oaks, California, as well as running her own summer camp where she taught art and was assistant theater director. She has also designed numerous sets for children's theatre. Lynda is presently teaching privately in her studio and through Studio Channel Islands Art Center in Camarillo, California. Contact Lynda through her website: <http://lyndabrothers.com/> for more information.

**Thoma Ewen** is a Canadian tapestry artist and Artistic Director of Moon Rain Centre, located in the Gatineau Hills, north of Ottawa. Thoma has been designing and weaving tapestries and exhibiting her works nationally and internationally for 40 years. She gives conference presentations, directs community tapestry projects and artists-in-the-schools projects, and coordinates exhibitions for Moon Rain Centre's highly successful Triennale Internationale des Arts Textiles en Outaouais. Thoma is the author of *The Living Tapestry Workbook* which you can find at <http://www.moonrain.ca/TapestryWorkBook.html> for more information.