Although her day job is teaching classes as an associate professor in The University of Alabama’s anthropology department and New College, Dr. Marysia Galbraith is also a potter.

“I value creative expression in my own life, and was saddened to learn how little opportunity there is for it in local public schools,” Galbraith says. “Of course, teachers incorporate these activities into their lessons, but they have so many other obligations associated with curriculum. So the arts are often neglected.”

Galbraith felt she had to do something to address the lack of arts education in her community’s schools, and she used her role at UA to expand her reach and create deeper learning experiences for college students as well.

“My idea was to set up a program to offer arts workshops in all media – music, dance, theatre, writing, pottery, arts and crafts, painting, even engineering – to local public school children, particularly in Title I schools where a substantial proportion of the children are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch,” Galbraith says.

For the past six years, students enrolled in Galbraith’s NEW 238 Honors Cooperation and Conflict course have led workshops in elementary schools through the organization she founded, Arts Renaissance in Tuscaloosa Schools (ARTS). Students hold hour-long workshops at University Place Elementary School in Tuscaloosa and Matthews Elementary School in nearby Northport, Ala. Depending on teachers’ preferences and the activity, a UA group can work with an entire grade in a large space like a lunchroom or with one class at a time. The NEW 238 students work in teams to plan and carry out the workshops, and each team of UA students conducts a workshop at least once a month.

Between 250 and 500 children attend ARTS workshops each semester. In Fall 2016, 17 UA students in the NEW 238 class led approximately 500 kids in art projects at their schools. Every semester, approximately 10 UA students also assist with workshops as volunteers.

“It’s very fulfilling,” says Ethan John-son, a junior from Hartsville, Ala., majoring in computer science. “College is generally all about you and your future, so to get away from that even for just a day to work with others brings a great sense of joy.”

After taking a few other service-learning courses, Brittany Grady says she fell in love with the ARTS initiative. She served as head intern for ARTS in Fall 2016, coordinating schedules with students and teachers, guiding workshop ideas, recruiting volunteers and making sure students had supplies needed for their workshops.

“One lesson that I have learned as a result of working with ARTS is that large-scale change begins with community development,” says Grady, a sophomore from Birmingham, Ala., majoring in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in human rights through New College. “Putting time and energy into improving one community can be translated into impacting the entire world.”

In the NEW 238 Honors Cooperation and Conflict class, students explore the ways in which members of society succeed and fail in living together effectively. They investigate and seek solutions for contemporary social problems, most specifically the issue of social and economic inequality in the United States.

After every volunteer experience, they write journal entries reflecting on the community needs they observed and connecting those needs to course topics. Dr. Tripp Marshall, principal of Matthews Elementary School, which does not have an art program or art teacher, says the activity he most enjoyed watching his students participate in involved creating pottery face jugs.

Marshall says he was especially touched as he watched one of his students working with the clay. “He may not have been a straight-A student, but he had an A project because he really cared, and he was engaged and he learned,” Marshall says.

During a paper-airplane ARTS workshop, children used the engineering-design process, a series of steps engineering teams employ to solve problems. This process is part of the kids’ science curriculum, so they learned how to combine art with another subject, something they had never done before, says Andrea Craig, a fifth grade teacher who has worked at Matthews Elementary for 23 years.

UA students say they look forward to workshops as much as the children do and find themselves learning from the kids.

“These kids are so smart, and they never stop asking ques-tions,” says Andrea Boyer, a senior from West Des Moines, Iowa, majoring in psychology.

Lucas Lowry, a senior from Shawnee, Kan., double-majoring in history and religious studies, says he didn’t expect to enjoy the workshops because he doesn’t consider himself good with kids. “But I found myself really latching onto the experience and curious about the things they had questions about,” he says. Lowry also says leading ARTS workshops has taught him skills he’ll bring into the working world, especially with regard to communicating and training.

“One of the main things that I’ve had to do is rethink multiple times how to explain something,” Lowry says. “We talk a lot theoretically about how one size does not fit all when it comes to education, but I think ‘one size does not fit all’ also applies in any job you’re going to have.”

Boyer, who plans to become an occupational therapist specializing in pediatrics, says she is better prepared for her career as well.

“It is experience with patience and creativity, learning how to teach things at a level each age group will un-derstand, and working on fine-motor skills, which OT focuses on,” Boyer says. “More broadly, it was a great op-portunity for growth of leadership skills, time manage-ment and team cooperation.”

For more information about NEW 238 Honors Cooperation and Conflict or Arts Renaissance in Tuscaloosa Schools, contact Dr. Marysia Galbraith at 205-348-8412 or mgalbrai@ua.edu.