Educators are fond of reciting a quote from Confucius, who said, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” Earlier this academic year, SUNY Orange professors and students put that quote to the test by creating a “Hands-On Learning” exhibit in Orange Hall Gallery.

For the exhibit, students created interactive displays designed to draw the viewer into a participatory exercise, thereby heightening the learning principles and boosting retention of the subject matter for the audience.

It was clearly a “hands-on” learning experience for all, as the College’s students were forced to think about how best to create a display that would most effectively teach their selected topic, and the folks who viewed the display were afforded an opportunity to “learn through doing.”

“At the top of the learning pyramid, it is shown that students retain about 10 percent of lectures,” says Maria Blon, associate professor of mathematics and computer science, who helped organize the exhibit. “But the base of the learning pyramid shows that students who teach someone else retain 90 percent of the subject matter, which means that the students who created these exhibits were retaining nearly everything about the topic they were demonstrating.”

The exhibit, which ran from mid-January through mid-February, was a full-scale demonstration of the collaborative abilities of the faculty and students at SUNY Orange, as nearly every academic area was represented. More than 90 students participated in creating displays.

The exhibit was coordinated through the Center for Teaching and Learning, with Blon receiving organizational assistance from Dr. Jennifer Merriam, Elizabeth Tarvin and Nancy Carlson. But the real energizing force behind the event was a full slate of professors who eagerly brought their students into the fold as well, pulling the exhibit together in less than a semester’s time.

“It was impressive that the teachers were able to work this into their classes so quickly,” Blon adds. “Although faculty members have been doing these types of things with their students for some time, there was never a place for them to show their work.”

Professor John Wolbeck’s engineering students attended the exhibit’s opening and its final day, reprising their popular fall semester bridge building and demolition project (shown above). Another popular display was a theater lighting demonstration created by Max Schaefer’s arts and communication students.

“The Hands-On Learning exhibit embodied two major principals of developmentally appropriate education, ‘constructivism’ and the ‘multiple intelligences theory,’” Carlson says. “Constructivism can be summed up by the quote, ‘it must be in the hands before it is in the head.’ It’s been proven that children learn most easily when they can have learning materials in their hands first, experience them, and then make the connection to an abstract.

“Howard Gardner, who developed the multiple intelligences theory, said, ‘It doesn’t matter how smart you are, it matters how you are smart.’ I challenged our students to not only think about how they were constructing their display, but to think about how they might adjust it for someone who was a logical-mathematical learner, or a linguistic learner or a spatial learner,” Carlson adds. “It was certainly a positive learning experience for our students.”

The next “Hands-On Learning” exhibit is planned for October 2008. It will be yet another opportunity for the College’s faculty and students to showcase the true power of interactive learning, as well as the energy that can be created through true collaboration from all corners of campus.