BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN ART AND SCIENCE:

Why do we lock young minds into traditional school disciplines? Why does the teacher move from one subject to another in elementary school, and the student from one room to another in middle school? Regardless of who or what moves, it's still a parade of subjects: history, math, reading, science and art. Then, when we graduate and begin jobs, we discover that life isn't a parade at all; it's one big chaotic fiesta of learning and responding in a world where disciplines overlap with each other in surprisingly blurry ways.

Maybe the world needs a school approach based on real life, rather than on test-driven content for subjects with artificial boundaries -- one in which creative engagement and mental flexibility are the learning goals.

This view was shored up recently when I went to Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art to prepare for a gallery talk held Sept. 10. Perhaps you have been so imprinted by the traditional packaging of school subjects that you are wondering why on earth a geologist would be speaking in the Atheneum, especially for an exhibit on impressionist art. If so, you aren't alone; many of us are still deeply imprinted by the content boxes learned in our early schooling. Well, the simple answer is that I think this school of painting rocks. What I discovered at the art museum was, in fact, a geology exhibit in camouflage, a place where the boundary between art and science merge beautifully.

The exhibit, "Childe Hassam and Connecticut Impressionism," which continues through Oct. 3, draws heavily from the Atheneum's often under-appreciated collection. Childe Hassam (1859-1935) was a leader of the American impressionist movement who clearly found inspiration in our neck of the woods. The exhibit, including paintings and sketches by Hassam and others, is worth a look even for folks like me who usually find their aesthetic nourishment in the great outdoors.

The majority of the exhibit's paintings are landscapes containing ledges, boulders or stone walls -- natural scenes that a geologist can't help reacting to. Imagine yourself in the gallery now. It's quiet. You look at a painting and let the art seep in. You see Connecticut reflected in a waterfall in Greenwich, a craggy overlook of Old Lyme, a ledge-studded farmyard in Wilton. Traveling further, you see glacial boulders and rock whalebacks in Gloucester, Mass.; a warm winter scene from Cornish, N.H.; a cold, rainy scene from Boston.

In each painting, rock, air, water, life and human intelligence blend into a single thing -- at least at the scale of the landscape. The impressionists seem to communicate this easily. It's a message I, too, try to communicate, using words, however, instead of canvas, because I had a rather rocky beginning with painting in my 20s, and I quickly became convinced my talents lay elsewhere.

In some paintings in the exhibit, stone walls appear as a welcome substitute for ledges or bedrock, offering a visual contrast to the lush, leafy landscapes of southern New England. "Change of Wind" has a wall running straight across nearly six feet of canvas, from one side of a Mystic meadow to the other. For me, it signifies continuity. "The Breadth of Autumn," with its stone frame on a rolling Waterford landscape, signals the tussle between classical straightness and Nature's preference for more romantic shapes. "Fishermen's Houses, Gloucester" sends a message of stability with a sea wall protecting the bluff from erosion and sudden change. "Road to the Land of Nod" speaks of crooked anarchy; its stone walls teeter and totter in a most unpredictable way. "Young Girl with Dog" captures security with its fence protecting a child. "Beacon Street, Boston" suggests redemption with its rubble pile of quarried granite waiting for architectural rebirth.
In each canvas, the colors and textures blend into one big beautiful thing, rather than many separate things. Yet in our schools, subjects and skills often remain divided. As an adult, I needed to learn that the rigid boundaries between the school subjects of childhood were largely illusions.

In the schools of my imagination, art and science need not be the same thing. But they could be, at least on good days.