Challenging Our Students' Place through Collaborative Art: A Service-Learning Approach

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Abstract

This article describes two art-based service-learning experiences that can serve as models for an authentic community-university partnership by challenging college students' sense of place through an examination of "others'" places. College students face displacement in adjusting to a new location and a new direction in life, while youth living in oppressive situations are often misplaced or forgotten. Collaborative community art can serve as a medium for reciprocal partnerships between college students and youths from neighborhoods near campus. Such community-university collaborations show qualities that demonstrate the benefits of service-learning and of university policies and procedures that support it.

Giving each person a voice is what builds community and makes art socially responsive.—Suzi Gablik *(1995, 82)*

Julius, a teenager from the low-income Frenchtown neighborhood near Florida State University, reluctantly arrived at our computer graphics class on the college campus wearing baggy clothes and a look of affable detachment. During the course he was partnered with Brian, a doctoral student in art education who seemed more focused on completing his doctoral studies than this particular class. Halfway through our partnership with the community art program, Julius stopped coming to our class. The director of the program informed me that he had been placed in juvenile detention. Her despondency about Julius's situation revealed a sense of defeat despite her dedication to the children in her program. But prior to Julius's incarceration, he and Brian had taken an opportunity to photograph the campus for images to use in their collaborative collage. Brian described the experience from the perspective of his own learning: "We took tons of pictures of Julius and things he was interested in, which was interesting because I often found myself surprised and intrigued with what he found photoworthy. It kind of forced me to look at campus through a fresh pair of eyes" *(Hutzel 2007, 35)*. Brian was challenged to see campus, a place that had become quite familiar to

him over the past couple of years, differently by Julius, a teenager most likely branded with an "at-risk" label. But with the loss of his youth partner, Brian seemed to find a purpose in this assignment by bringing attention to a boy who had been displaced. Brian titled the piece "Julius' FSU World Tour" and included several images of Julius on campus. At our culminating recognition event, held at the youths' community center in Frenchtown, a recently released Julius attended and saw the poster-size collage of his images displayed for the community to see.

In our culture of mobility, where college students and other young adults move particularly often, finding one's own place can be a challenge. Lucy Lippard *(1997, 33)* described sense of place as "a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional educational fields." As we search for our own place, which includes the physical as well as the metaphysical, we also run the risk of misplacing others from our lives, those who, like Julius, are at more risk of being easily forgotten. The transient nature of the college years can cause college students to feel displaced themselves, as they search for their place in the world, their purpose in life, and their college major. The college years in particular are a time to search for place, to consider futures, and to focus inward. But during this time, are we challenging college students to be critical of their current places? Are we encouraging them to attend to and learn from others' places through experiential learning? Or do we keep them "safe" on campus to do the work of "real" learning, thus reinforcing the misplacement of forgotten others like Julius?

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We live in a world of others, in which fear often prevents us from fully engaging with human beings deemed different or strange. Outreach and engagement activities can help develop students' sense of place in the world when they provide opportunities for students to be challenged—challenged to consider the abilities of others and challenged to consider their own responsibilities in making places better. Jones *(2001)*, for instance, has challenged us to explore the otherness of children by bringing them in, listening to them, and seeing "things through their eyes" *(173)*, as Brian was able to do with Julius. There is a natural possibility to challenge

college students' understanding of otherness by searching for similarity and sharing knowledge with a youth partner, especially one whose life experiences may be vastly different from those of many of our more privileged students.

Placing Art

Lippard *(1997)* contends that the places artists come from impact their work just as the work of artists impacts the places they reside. This social construct of art can give students experiences that connect practice with reflection, the personal with the social, and enable them to confront "otherness." Critic Suzi Gablik *(1995)* challenged postmodern artists to understand that "the boundary between self and Other is fluid rather than fixed; the Other is included within the boundary of selfhood" *(84)* through what she referred to as connective aesthetics. In art, connective aesthetics provides an opportunity for students to reconsider their places through an immersion into a place possibly foreign to them. Crafting an art-based aesthetic experience for students to connect with others can add significantly to their repertoire of life experiences. Through art the familiar can become strange *(Bastos 1998)*, and, conversely, the strange can become familiar while the relationship between self and other can be reconstructed *(Gablik 1995)*.

In art education, there is extensive research contending that an intrinsic relationship exists between art and social relevance. The art for life paradigm *(Anderson and Milbrandt 2005)*, for instance, makes the case for art that is inherently connected to social concerns and responsibility. Community-based art education has existed for many years as a method for examining art in community settings *(Ulbricht 2005)*, often as a step toward social action and social reconstruction *(Bastos 1998; Hutzel 2005)*. With the advent of service-learning methodology, art education has a renewed and refreshed opportunity to incorporate place into art making through community experiences. A definition of service-learning I find most informative states, "Service-learning involves students using what they learn in their formal study to work with others and make a beneficial difference in the world. The service provided is never charity, because it is not only the community (as is the case in so many community service projects) benefiting from the gift being given. The student also learns something from the experience" *(Taylor and Ballengee-Morris 2004, 7)*. The reciprocal learning experiences that students encounter in service-learning can challenge their sense of place by developing a place for them in the community *(Taylor 2004)*. The qualities of a reciprocal learning approach to

service-learning can provoke students to reflect on their own place as well as the place of their community partners, as each is considered to have an expertise and knowledge to contribute toward the experience. Through a reciprocal relationship, students can come to see inherent inequalities that can incite a quest to participate in creating change *(Bastos 1998)*. Collaborative art provides a mode of reflection as well as a vision for change, as the negotiation among partners requires an intimate dialogue of values and beliefs as well as visions and ideas.

In this article, I present two action research studies of collaborative art-based service-learning experiences that connected college students with disenfranchised youth from neighborhoods near the college campus to produce art. I present the studies through a narrative action research approach to highlight my own learning as well as the voices of the participants *(Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Eikeland 2006)*. The first study took place at the University of Cincinnati, where youths were employed by a nonprofit program to work with university students to create public, community art in their neighborhood. The second study, which contributed the scenario described earlier, took place at Florida State University. College students in a computer graphics for art education course were partnered with youths from an adjacent neighborhood to learn Photoshop together and create a collaborative collage of personal images. In each of these service-learning methodologies, the goal was to create a reciprocal relationship between the college students and youth partners, honoring the knowledge and abilities each could contribute.

The Art in the Market Program

I had returned to my hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, having completed a volunteer year as a service-learning coordinator in a high school. I was responsible for about fifteen African American teenagers who were employed to participate in the Art in the Market program, which prepared them to work with college students to create public art in a low-income, urban neighborhood near the university known as Over-the-Rhine. There was a distinct otherness between us that I realized would challenge my sense of identity and place. Despite having been raised in Cincinnati, my comfortable suburban upbringing did not extend into the urban core, and I was unprepared for the realities I was about to face. But I was searching for a place through art education and service-learning and found my way here, where fourteen-year-olds had more life experience than I did at twenty-four.

I recall a day we had visited a community art center near Over-the-Rhine. Our plan for the day included a stop at another art organization in the downtown business district. I placed a call for a taxicab to pick us up at the community art center, and waited. An hour later, I asked the front desk attendant if taxis usually took so long. She said, "Taxis don't come to this part of town." I didn't know what to do next, so I turned to the kids for help. Robert, a socially marginalized boy within the group, stepped up and said, "We need to take bus number 27 to get downtown and transfer to bus number 17." The other kids in the group who were perceived as the cooler kids also knew the bus system well but were not as familiar with how to get to this particular art organization. Robert proudly and confidently led us to the first bus stop and all the way to our destination with ease. I quickly realized that I had placed all control over our situation with a sixteen-year-old. And he successfully led the way.

Later in the program during a course at the university in which the youths were partnered with college students in a community-based art class, the city of Cincinnati faced heated racial protest and division over the shooting death of a young, unarmed black man by a city police officer *(Bastos and Hutzel 2004)*. The mayor instituted a mandatory citywide curfew in response to the protests that took place. Our class met during this period, so the youth had to leave early in order to navigate the bus system to get home before the curfew. But in the time we had, we took an opportunity to discuss the occurrences in the city. Dana, a perceived tough and emotionally distraught seventeen-year-old, warned us to stay away from Over-the-Rhine because "they're targeting white people." Another student, Shanda, showed us a mark on her arm from a rubber bullet an officer had shot at her. Hearing their stories, the college students were at a loss as to what to say. Where was our place in all of this? We could have easily avoided it but, along with the youths, chose to make a statement through art by covering boarded-up windows—a result of some of the protests—with messages of hope and togetherness. While the messages were perhaps naïve, the process encouraged hope and healing and promoted dialogue between our two distinct groups. And while we painted, several Over-the-Rhine residents offered their own suggestions of peace messages and thanks for our art.

Andy, a master's student in the course, reflected on the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood and recognized his part in the community in several ways. He lived less than a mile away from the neighborhood and had participated in the development of a public artwork

with the youth participants. His group's finished art piece incorporated a trash-to-treasure concept by using old bottles and cans to add color and texture to a cement sculpture. Another art piece represented the entire Cincinnati community in a heart-shaped quilt, which used clothes and fabrics that had been collected throughout the neighborhood. Alex and her team of youth artists used images reflecting what the community of Cincinnati meant to them while extending their reach into the Over-the-Rhine community through the use of the old fabric and clothing. While others in Cincinnati were retreating with increasing levels of fear and distrust, the college students and I were recognizing our sense of place in the turmoil of racial divide in the city. The youths in the Art in the Market program showed us the way and helped us find our place in the turmoil of the community.

A Computer Graphics Collaboration

While teaching a computer graphics class at Florida State University, I implemented a collaborative learning experience similar to Art in the Market. In the course I challenged the students to learn Photoshop alongside a youth partner from a low-income neighborhood near campus. The youth collaboration was a natural way to encourage the student art educators to consider teaching strategies. At the same time, the students were challenged to consider their place outside the university community by learning about the youths' lifestyle and community experiences. As Taylor *(2004, 33)* concedes, "authentic service-learning programs can reeducate people in the art of living well" by living in and inhabiting a place. Our collaboration provided an opportunity to inhabit the university's neighboring community.

The college students in the computer graphics class were exposed to their campus with fresh eyes and welcomed to the youths' community through their collaborative art experience. While several students initially showed resistance to this partnership as a learning opportunity, most eventually realized and appreciated the opportunity to connect their learning of computer art with sociocultural concerns and realities. After the initial meeting, for instance, one student commented, "I was a little nervous about meeting the youth for the first time, but I was immediately at ease . . . She was very helpful once we got started and pointed and clicked and explored the program with us." The recognition of the youth partner as "helpful" paved the way for a reciprocal learning experience. Another student reflected on the wisdom the youths brought to her experience, saying, "The younger students aren't as afraid

or cautious as we are. You usually can go back and fix something if needed. It is funny that our younger students are comforting us with those words" *(Hutzel 2007, 35)*.

The recognition of this two-way street between the youth and college students represented the values of reciprocity and engagement Weerts *(2005)* exposed in his analysis of knowledge flow in community-university partnerships. Our youngest youth partner, Demontez, for instance, even received accolades from his two college student partners in reflecting on their initial experience with him. "Roni and I were trying to follow the lesson, and Demontez jumped in head first and was testing and playing with it. . . . Even when we did follow parts of the lesson, after he saw me do it once, just once, he could do it again with no problem. His brain was a sponge. He was basically teaching us at 9 years old! . . . He is going to be more of a benefit to Roni and I, than we will be to him, on the computer" *(Hutzel 2007, 34)*. When students learned to rely on the youth for direction, just as I had in Cincinnati to utilize the bus system, the youths were encouraged to take leadership roles in our learning process.

The college students recognized the benefits the youth partners contributed to their learning as well as the impact they had on the youths, reinforcing the knowledge flow present in the partnership. One student said of her youth partner, "I think it boosted his ego to know that he was more experienced than a college student when it came to computers." And hosting the exhibition at the youths' community center confronted the college students with a closer look at the realities of the youths' lives. While they may have had misperceptions about the youth being poor, neglected, or "at risk," witnessing the sense of community present at the housing complex exposed them to a more positive aspect of the youths' neighborhood. One student described the role of their collaborative art making as the path toward their relationship, claiming, "The artwork was a good vehicle for establishing a relationship and a non-threatening way for us to enter their community—sharing our art with them and their friends and family. A celebration" *(Hutzel 2007, 36)*. The celebration was natural and not contrived or forced. Through the process of making art and sharing the final product at a celebratory event, a reciprocal partnership was developed.

Ultimately, the service-learning experience informed the students' thinking about art and art education, their chosen majors, as a place for social responsiveness. One student summed up this realization, claiming, "The experience on Tuesday [the reception], in relation to the entire semester, confirmed that art is about

people. It was sort of crazy for me (not the best technologically adept individual) not only to learn the basics of Photoshop, but to be responsible for teaching a 6th grader, and hoping to make sure she enjoyed the experience."[1] This student questioned her place as an artist and educator by exploring her place on campus as well as another person's nearby place, allowing her to see the interconnectedness of the two. And she was able to recognize that she didn't need to be a computer expert in order to create a rich learning experience with her youth partner. Giving up her desire to be in charge allowed her to develop a reciprocal partnership and a meaningful learning experience for each of them.

Discussion

The qualities of these two experiences reveal the meaningful learning experienced by the participants, and observing them can lead to larger notions of community-university partnerships through service-learning, outreach, and engagement. Such aspects of collaboration as the narrative details of these experiences can better inform decisions about policies and procedures impacting outreach activities of universities. It is necessary to examine the practices of universities partnering with communities through service-learning and engagement activities in order to strive for reciprocal relationships that benefit both partners. On the one hand, the university hopes to further research and improve teaching practices. On the other hand, the community hopes to have its interests taken into consideration in the partnership in order to improve local residents' quality of life. It is possible to meet the needs of both partners through reciprocal relationships.

Faculty who engage in service-learning activities often find the experience a meaningful learning exchange for their students and an important method for reaching out to local neighborhoods. However, university policies are often unsupportive of such activities. Although service, as one of the three areas of academic focus, is found in faculty promotion and tenure requirements, university culture often suggests otherwise. Service requirements often reflect an interest in faculty service to the university through committee work, not as an outreach effort with local communities.

Research activities in communities have also become troubled, even though community-based and participatory action research methodologies are by their nature well-adapted to benefiting communities. Institutional review board (IRB) policies have become crippling to exploratory and action research methods that are often

associated with community engagement and service-learning activities. In addition, confining student contact to the duration of a ten-week quarter creates barriers to developing longer-term relationships with community organizations, although such relationships are an important component of successful service-learning activities. Consequently, untenured faculty often find the barriers to outreach and engagement activities overwhelming.

As these two studies suggest, however, service-learning can be a beneficial approach to challenging students' sense of place and responsibility toward others. Meaningful and engaged learning experiences are important to many educators. Students benefit from activities that connect them with others. Connecting service-learning experiences directly to students' majors can help them learn to apply socially responsive attitudes toward their future work and life goals. As a part of the challenge, students can reflect on their current place and future direction and learn to respond to the needs and interests of others. They can learn to be more socially and civically engaged. In the meantime, students can become more grounded in their current place and more critical of their choices for future places while recognizing the inherent privilege their college degree may grant them in the future. The students who participated in Art in the Market and the computer graphics course demonstrated a change in their perceptions of their younger partners by recognizing the youths' contributions to the experiences. University policies and procedures that are sensitive to the possibilities and supportive of service-learning experiences could result in more faculty incorporating experiences like these into their teaching and research activities.

Endnote

1. Online personal communication, March 2003.

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