

**Teaching Notes: Community Engagement as Pedagogy**

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*Introduction*

As an art educator, I spend a lot of time thinking about how we can put the wind at teachers' backs. How are students naturally inclined to learn and how can we take advantage of those predispositions so that we are teaching with the grain instead of struggling against it? Findings suggest that context is crucial; inundated with input, our brains are always on the lookout for information that will impact our social, emotional and physical wellbeing (Damasio, 1994) and flag it for retention and transfer (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Immodino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). In theory, situating collaborative work in the community offers the ultimate contextualized learning opportunity, creating works together that have an impact not just on oneself, but on many others. By extension, pedagogy in the form of Community Based Art Education allows instructors of Arts Administration to teach to our pre-existing cognitive tendencies by situating content within authentic social, emotional and physical spaces. This was the inspiration for a course titled Community Engaged Art at The College of New Jersey: to center learning in the spaces that really matter to us as human beings.

*The Course*

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) is a state college with a liberal arts emphasis located in Ewing Township, adjacent to its original home in the majority-minority capital city of Trenton. Previously known as Trenton State, TCNJ's name change and move outside of the city, created a wake of discontent with local residents. As a result, the term "community" is largely used by the college in a geographic sense to refer to the neighborhoods surrounding the college. With TCNJ's interest in reweaving some of those tattered connections, generating a class on

Community Engaged Art was an ideal opportunity to both mend some relationships with our neighbors and embed the co-creation of artwork in a real-world context.

Community Engaged Art was an advanced community-engaged learning course designed to introduce students to the complexities of community-based art through a study of the best practices as well as contemporary issues surrounding the actualization of community art projects. As part of the coursework, students engaged with the surrounding geographic community and partnered with local artists to engage in local public art dialogues and generate collaborative works of community-based art. Nine students from a range of visual art majors enrolled, including studio majors and pre-service art educators. The course was supported by the Center for Community Engaged Learning and Research and funded by an NJM Urban Innovation Award.

### *Student Objectives*

By the conclusion of the course, the successful student was expected to:

- Examine contemporary issues and approaches to community-based art through readings, in-class activities, artmaking, films, research, field trips, community interactions, and presentations.
- Articulate and apply discipline-specific vocabulary, industry concepts, and best practices in the field through project proposals and presentations (through written and verbal forms).
- Plan and create a work of public art in collaboration with members of the surrounding community based in a relationship-driven awareness of the community's unique assets, wants and needs.

- Exhibit professional behavior through in-class meetings, assignments, interactions with community partners, and field experiences.

### *Theoretical Rationale*

The theoretical framework behind the course design combines contextualized learning, embodied cognition, and Community Based Art Education. Because much of formal education at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level takes place in the classroom, it is inherently decontextualized, which limits the likelihood of retention, transfer, and application to real-world contexts (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). As an antidote, it could be argued that community-based projects tender high-impact forms of contextualized learning because they couch new skills and knowledge not just within a specific physical context, but also within a network of relationships and teamwork that contributes to the collective realization of the final work, drawing from multiple aspects of embodied cognition (Blatt-Gross, 2018). Arguments for the embodied nature of learning are becoming more accepted in education, with scholars noting that both the state of the body and the environment influence the mind (Eerland, et.al., 2011; Adam & Galinsky, 2012). As Wilson & Golonka (2013) wrote, “[e]mbodied cognition (in any form) is about acknowledging the role perception, action, and the environment can now play” (n.p.). Clues concerning the interconnectedness of our corporeal experience with our forms of communication can be found by analyzing language use, which provides much evidence of intellectual concepts growing out of the bodily experience through the use of body or movement metaphors. For example, the phrase “moving forward” refers to progress, a “head’s up” alerts someone to the unexpected, or being “hot” for an attractive other. Our discursive language is filled with examples in which the body is used as a metaphor to make tangible an abstraction

(Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; Miles, et. al., 2010), so there is reason to speculate that the same influence extends to our visual communication. More radically, scholars have argued that the body and environment are not mere influences on cognition, but constitute the tools of cognition itself; the brain, body, and physical environment are all resources to accomplish tasks and they work best in concert with one another (Chemero, 2009; Katz, 2013; Wilson & Golonka, 2013).

Community Based Learning (CBL) is an approach that takes advantage of the natural interconnectedness of the brain, body and environment by nestling student activities within a greater physical, social, and emotional context. Collaboration is essential to its effectiveness (Blatt-Gross, 2017, 2018). Long-term impacts often correlate with peer collaboration. In particular, collaborative and project-based approaches that address real-world challenges are linked to long-term competencies (Luke, Lowen, Moretto & Youker, 2021).

The arts have a particular advantage in the embodied realm because “First and foremost...the arts are things that people *do with their bodies.*” (Dissanayake, 2000, p. 178). Further, situating artmaking within a collaborative setting, in addition to situating it within a community, creates a nesting doll of meaningful concentric contexts with student learning at the center (Blatt-Gross, 2016). Community Based Art Education (CBAE) combines the benefits of Community Based Learning with the advantages of artmaking in the context of Arts Administration as students learn to manage public art projects and become co-creators with members beyond the campus community. Teaching Arts Administration offers prime possibilities to situate student learning in authentic contexts through its applied nature. Tasking students with the challenge of creating a work of art for a specific community group can focus learning and make use of Community Based Art Education’s pedagogical strategies (Krensky & Steffen,

2009). Krensky and Steffen (2009) describe how participants in community-based art often experience an increased sense of self-identity and self-efficacy as well as collective identity and collective efficacy. Through sustained effort, shared resources and a common goal, CBAE has the potential to result in a community of practice, in which a *sense of community cohesion* emerges over time around continual interaction (Wenger, 1998).

### *Activities*

Putting theories of contextualized learning, embodied cognition, and Community Based Art Education into practice, this course on Community Engaged Art utilized the C.R.A.F.T. strategy (Contact. Research. Action. Feedback. Teaching.) proposed by Schwarzman & Knight, et. al. in their *Beginners Guide to Community Based Arts* (2015). The goal of using this strategy was to ensure that action (in this case, artmaking) remained at the tip of the iceberg, supported by a well-developed foundation of deep understanding and connectedness with the community. Partnering with four local artists who shared their personal community-based projects as well and acted as gateways into Trenton's community art scene allowed students to develop relationships with residents and tap into existing networks. We examined other public art projects that did not resonate with their communities and discussed the reasons for their removal. Field trips were a regular part of the course and included visiting local galleries, arts centers, walking tours, and meetings with residents and community organizations.



Figure 1. Bilingual signage identified crops and provided didactic information for young visitors to the garden. (Photo credit: Lauren Adams)

Using project-based learning as a strategy (Luke, Lowen, Moretto & Youker, 2021), the course charged students with participating in two community-driven projects. The culminating project was a partnership with the East Trenton Collaborative, a resident-led community organization dedicated to improving the quality of life, in which students were asked to make artwork for a local community garden. To ensure authentic relationships and to engage existing local networks, the four collaborating artists mentored students through the process. These relationships between student and artist proved key to the realization and success of the project. Navigating the complexities of generating public art, students spent time learning about Trenton's geopolitical, socioeconomic, and industrial history, as well as its contemporary assets

and challenges. They met multiple times with stakeholders, specifically the caretakers of the garden, liaisons from the East Trenton Collaborative, and residents who lived in the immediate vicinity, centering the community dialogue in the design process. Writing proposals and presenting their designs to our community partners provided the students with experience in a community-driven design process which included receiving feedback from our stakeholders. This dialogue prompted the design shift toward a more interactive format; after the students proposed their initial designs, the residents requested more educational content to engage and inspire the youth in the area to learn more about gardening. In response, the students added a scavenger hunt component, which matched the shirts in the mural with color-coded signs in the garden that describe gardening best practices. Including text in both Spanish and English was an important nod to the large Hispanic population of the city. In addition to the bilingual signage that identified crops and intended to engage and educate younger viewers, students created a 24' double-sided mural depicting gardening activities on one side and a honeycomb representing the industrious nature required to keep the garden going.





Figure 2. Students work together to install a double-sided mural. (Photo credit: Lauren Adams)



Figure 3. Final installation was completed in partnership with the East Trenton Collaborative and area residents. (Photo credit: Lauren Adams)

*Debriefing*

Lawton, Walker and Green (2019) write that CBAE should be educational, reciprocal, empowering, collaborative, and transformational. Although I can not speak for the community participants, for the students, this project appeared to meet these expectations. It was educational in the sense that students learned and applied new skills to both the practice of large-scale art making and the social skills required to interact and build relationships with individuals outside of their personal social circles and with backgrounds unlike their own. It was reciprocal in that both the community members and the students were active participants in determining the scope and nature of the project. It was empowering in that students were able to exceed their expectations and surprised themselves with their own and collective competency. It was collaborative in that the work resulted from a dialogue between the community, local artists, a community organization and among the students themselves. It was transformative for the space itself, which was radically brighter and more inviting afterwards, as well as the participants, who were all evidently pleased with the results. As one student stated with a smile, “This class changed me!”

My observations reveal that students experienced a number of expected and unexpected outcomes; As anticipated, most students were able to successfully meet or exceed the stated objectives of the class. While this project’s initial interactions were defined largely by a geographic community, it was evident that over time the process yielded a “community of practice,” in which students *felt* more connected to one another, the collaborating artists, and to the residents of the city than they did prior to the experience. From this perspective, the definition of community, as a geographic designation, expanded to include the feeling of community coherence. Returning to Wenger’s (1998) community of practice, the three

components contributing to a coherence of a community can be identified in this class: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement, or the actual *doing* of the project over time, took the form of dedicated time working together on the creation of the mural. Wenger notes that geographical proximity can facilitate, but is not equivalent to, practice. According to Wenger, being able to talk and interact while working together is key to mutual engagement. It was during the long hours that students spent standing side by side painting the mural that the most relaxed and revealing conversations took place. Because the arts are bodily activities (Dissanayake, 2000), they represent some manifestation of embodied cognition and may point to enhanced learning.

Joint enterprise results from collective negotiation and results in a sense of mutual accountability, in which all participants share a commitment to the outcomes of the project. Wenger (1989) wrote “It is their negotiated response to their situation and this belongs to them in a profound sense, in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control” (p. 77). In this case, students negotiated the form of the final project with the community representatives, creating a sense of agency and personal investment in the project. Students felt a serious commitment to the community residents and ultimately shared that they were working so industriously because they did not want to let their partners down. There was a pervasive spirit of making something worthwhile – not because it was expected for an assignment, but because it was expected as part of a partnership.

Over time, students developed a shared repertoire, or “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83) as part of their practice. Shared points of reference reinforce the connectedness of the group. Coming into the classroom in the morning, I saw evidence of their shared repertoires in the form

of a checklist created on the whiteboard listing each student and delegating tasks. I would often overhear discussions detailing shared late nights, or anecdotes about someone they had met in the city and have kept in touch with.

Because CBAE makes use of collaborative strategies and temporospatial learning, it lends itself to the emergence of communities of practice, as mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire are largely intrinsic to the process of developing and creating a large-scale, collaborative work of public art (Blatt-Gross, 2018). These strategies, coupled with giving the students agency to determine the final project, CBAE seems to be an effective tool for facilitating this community coherence.

Although it is impossible to pinpoint the specific cause of these outcomes, revisiting the nature of embodied cognition as learning that is situated within physical, social, and emotional contexts suggests that such a holistic approach to education may play a role in generating more robust academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Much like dance and military groups that form social bonds through coordinated action (McNeill, 1995), the synchronization of bodies required to co-create a visual work of art might generate similar social and emotional cohesiveness. Further, sharing goals, resources, and motivation might be the impetus for the social coherence Wenger (1998) identifies in the process of forming communities of practice. Noting the very physical nature of collaborative art making, it behooves us to recall Wilson and Golonka's (2013) assertion that our brain is not our only cognitive research, but one part of a holistic package of tools. A potential area for further study is the cognitive experience of participants in large-scale art projects as they coordinate goals, resources, find purpose in creating collaborative community-based art, and engage in the physical synchronization required in such a project. Because there is little research on the outcomes of CBAE among students in post-secondary

education, and even less empirical research investigating the long-term outcomes of participation in community art endeavors (Fairey, 2018), additional research is necessary. Further, additional research from the perspective of the community members is essential to understanding the full impact of such projects.

### *Appraisal*

Although successful on both academic and communal levels for the students, this type of high-impact educational experience is made possible through a significant investment of time, labor, and funding. Because social networks are often difficult to access for outsiders, partnering with local artists facilitated much of the success of the projects, giving students ongoing, personal interactions with local artists as well as access to their professional networks within the community. To ensure the artists were compensated for their work, stipends were funded through an NJM Urban Innovation Grant as well as TCNJ's School of Arts & Communication and Center for Community Engagement. This additional support expanded the scope of what was possible when working with community partners and realizing projects that have material demands. The financial cost, as well as the time-consuming nature of teaching community-based courses can be a heavy lift for institutions and their faculty. At the same time, this investment yielded remarkable results, and the long-term outcomes far exceeded my expectations as a teacher and a scholar. From a pedagogical perspective, witnessing the internal motivation and authentic learning that unfolded over time was highly rewarding. As a result, I encourage faculty to make the investment in Community-Based Art Education and, moreover, for administrators to incentivize and support those efforts.

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