

# LEAF-ING A LEGACY

*“Virtual communication through a variety of platforms holds potential for intergenerational interaction that is not limited by geographic proximity. The potential benefits for all participants can only be imagined.”*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Leaf-ing a Legacy is the story of a university art education class that joined with an elementary classroom and residents in a long-term health/rehabilitative center through a service-learning project that utilized digital technology and art making in a problem-based learning format to explore the concept of legacy. Evidence was found that the experience promoted socio-emotional learning and fostered the building of socio-emotional capital for the participants involved.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*intergenerational relationships/socio-emotional learning/service learning/digital technology*

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What is a legacy? Bold block letters on a background of bright orange were flashed upon a screen. I posed the question to several boys and girls sitting at tables in Ms. Smith's fourth grade elementary classroom. The children took turns defining the term and telling of instances when they had been the recipients of something passed down. From baseball cards to articles of clothing, the children's examples of the big idea or universal theme (Stewart & Walker, 2005, p. 5) of legacy suggested they understood it to mean something of value passed on or left behind for another's benefit. I explained to the students that during the next few weeks they would have the opportunity to explore the idea of legacy and see how engaging with older adults, and university students while making art may create a legacy that benefits others. This article describes the six-week program referred to as Leaf-ing a Legacy. I give examples of how individuals in the program from multiple generations interacted together through art and technology; thereby, creating socio-emotional connections, or empathy, that left an impact on those who actively participated.

### **Program Preparations**

The story begins during the fall, 2017. I shared with two of my art student advisees that I would be happy to provide a service-learning experience for them to include in their fall schedule of classes. Through word of mouth I learned of two other students, who were interested in hands-on learning and community engagement. One was from the theatre department and the other was training for a career in special education. We met in my office to discuss parameters for the problem-based course. Problem-based learning utilizes small groups, tutorial instruction and active learning (Kretchmar, 2013). We considered the problem of how to develop intergenerational relationships using the media of art while building socio-emotional capital and fostering socio-emotional learning, or the ability to care for others in the process. I shared my personal research interest of intergenerational relationships fostered through art and told my group about a teacher at a local elementary school and an activity director at a health/rehabilitation center who wanted us to facilitate art experiences for them.

Providing a service to the community is a way to bridge university academics with the reality of everyday (Butin, 2005). Service-learning provides a potentially "transformative pedagogical practice" (p. vii). It is not just an intellectual exercise, but rather, an "experiential intersection" (p. 101). Felten and Clayton (2011) say service-learning combines academic study with community service, experiential learning and reflection (p. 82). I discussed with my small class of four that not only would we be performing a community service, but we would also be using a constructivist framework for the course. This implied that we would be constructing the class as we went. According to the theory of constructivism, students' prior knowledge is refined through experience for new understanding. We hoped to build new meaning from prior knowledge and new experiences as we engaged in intergenerational relationships, art concepts and technology applications. Multiple educational theorists such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner and Lev Vygotsky are associated with the active learning of constructivism (Robertson, 2014).

In conjunction with what my university students and I were planning, I made arrangements with a graduate nursing student, Jessica, to participate with us when we visited the health/rehabilitative center. Her interest resided in geriatric care. As I corresponded with Jessica through email and some face-to-face conversations I suggested that she do some

preliminary research to determine how socio-emotional theory might be involved in the legacy project.

Jessica discovered that socio-emotional selectivity theory entails making the most of one's time in life to develop care and concern for others (Carstensen, 1992, p. 107). Research suggests that valuing and appreciating others contributes toward school success and mitigates the sense of loneliness, isolation and depression that often characterizes older adults living in nursing homes (Benner, Thornton and Crosnoe, 2017; Carstensen, 1992).

I anticipated that the elementary students, older adults and university students would all benefit from building socio-emotional capital; however, I was unable to gather data to this effect due to our projected start date for the class. My institutional review board suggested that I focus my attention on my university students' perceptions rather than surveying the other participants. With that in mind, Leaf-ing A Legacy's focus became exploratory and I concentrated on what I saw and what the university students reported.

My students and I began the project by setting up a meeting schedule where we would provide art activities at the two physical sites to take place concurrently. The sites were chosen based on word-of-mouth and convenience. We planned to meet for a period of six weeks at the fourth-grade elementary classroom and at Ridgecrest, a health/rehabilitative center. We also planned to join the two groups in an affinity space (Gee, 2005, p. 223) using Google Hangouts where we could virtually connect as individuals with a common purpose and goal. The virtual component was added to investigate if intergenerational relationships could be developed virtually. Geography often plays a role in age segregation. With that in mind, I was curious if the elementary students and older adults could develop a sense of connection without being in close proximity.

### **Day 1 at Health Wellness and Environmental Studies (HWES)**

On the first day of the project my four university students and I met Ms. Smith, the Gifted and Talented (GT) teacher in her classroom at the Health Wellness and Environmental Studies Elementary Magnet School. Ms. Smith and I had worked together on previous projects and she was open to Leaf-ing a Legacy because of her desire to include technology and her flexibility in programming curriculum for her Gifted and Talented students. The Arkansas Department of Education (2013) defines gifted and talented children as the following:

Gifted and talented children and youth are those of high potential or ability whose learning characteristics and educational needs require qualitatively differentiated educational experiences and/or services.

Possession of these talents and gifts, or the potential for their development, will be evidenced through an interaction of above average intellectual ability, task commitment and /or motivation, and creative ability (Arkansas Department of Education, 2009).

We briefly discussed the plans for the day with Ms. Smith and then she left to retrieve the 15 students who would be joining us for the day's art activity. After the children arrived they divided into four table groups. I clicked through several presentation slides as an introduction to our project. The first slide was related to the idea of legacy. Several slides

followed that illustrated contemporary artists who worked with leaves as their art medium. Rather than focusing on the ephemeral qualities of land art I suggested that the medium itself was indicative of legacy. The trees in this case passed on something of value to benefit others. Rayven and Tavis, two of my university students, described the artists, Sylvain Meyer and Andy Goldsworthy. The university students pointed out the artists' unique approaches to land art sculptures that incorporated pattern, color and texture. Alyssa, another of the university students, read *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) to encourage students to think about the concept of legacy and how it could be tied to our project's motif of leaves. After the introductory discussion, Ms. Smith led the university students, her GT students, and me to one of the school's garden areas where the students began work on a leaf sculpture inspired by artists, Meyer and Goldsworthy. Students were to think about nature's legacy while they worked. It was not long before three unique sculptures took shape. The first team created what appeared to be a tree made of leaves and bark. The second sculpture resembled a basketball and the third sculpture seemed to be a glowing lava flow of marigold petals that outlined several bushes in the garden. Breanna, one of the university students, recalled the leaf sculpture activity after the fact and said that she saw understanding develop between herself and the elementary students as they got into the rhythm of everybody's ideas being valuable. She said that she as the teacher did not do the directing but only guided decisions that were made (B. Ballew, personal communication, November 29, 2017). Breanna's recollection agrees with recent research that says children who engage in art education benefit from socio-emotional learning and that the collaborative nature, cooperative spirit and social interaction that often accompanies art activities are skills that contribute toward school success (Holochwost, Wolf, Wolfbrown, Fisher and Grady, 2016). After the sculptures were completed, the students documented their work with iPads then they returned to class. The residents at the nursing home did not meet for their first day during the same time as the elementary students' first day. The next week; however, both sites met.



Figure 1. Drawing leaf contours

## Day 2 at Ridgecrest Nursing Home and HWES

For the second day of the project the university students divided responsibilities. Two of the university students went to each of the sites. At both sites the university students

reviewed the project telling the children and older adults that they would be considering the idea of legacy. The university students also asked the students to think about why legacy is important and how traditions and valuing others may be a benefit of legacy. The motif of leaves was used again to represent the idea of legacy. When trees shed their foliage, the fallen leaves benefit other organisms. Plants and animals use the leaves for shelter and nutrients. In the same way that a leaf can provide something of value, so intergenerational participants can provide something of value to others, namely socio-emotional connections.

At the two sites both children and older adults were encouraged to take a closer look at a leaf—the motif for our project. The university students scattered a number of leaves that they had collected on the table for the children and older adults to choose a favorite. At Ridgecrest Health/Rehabilitative Center the university students, and several other helpers including myself, a nursing student, Jessica, and Samantha, an educational outreach specialist for the Center on Aging, who also joined us at the rehabilitative center, assisted the older adults in the art making process. We attached the resident's leaf choice with tape to drawing paper. With the aid of the attachment we helped the older adults trace around the outside edge of their leaf creating a line contour of the image. The drawing was to prepare the older adults in recognizing that they could accomplish a similar task with an iPad drawing application.



*Figure 2.* Children's lava flow leaf sculpture

Following the paper and pencil exercise each of the older adults was assisted in taking a picture of their leaf with an iPad. The older adults struggled a bit with knowing how much pressure to exert in pressing the camera button, but with help all were successful in capturing the leaf's image. Next, the assistants imported the photo on a layer in Autodesk Sketchbook, an iPad drawing application. The older adults were shown how to use their finger or a stylus to trace the outline of the leaf much like they had done on the piece of paper. The sense of accomplishment and smiles on the ladies' faces were contagious. Jessica later reflected, "They were so excited. They told the other residents. They told their family members, we are doing art...come check it out" (J. Moore, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

At the elementary school the children had a similar reaction. With the aid of the university students and peers they were able to draw their leaf on paper then import their photo of the leaf into a layer on Autodesk Sketchbook and create a digital drawing. Both the children and older adults gained a sense of confidence and excitement during the drawing task. The collaborative effort illustrated the making of socio-emotional connections between the helpers and the artists. We were not able to virtually connect the rehabilitative center and elementary classroom as we had previously hoped due to technical difficulties; however, both the older adults and children recorded themselves making an introduction to the other group. These recordings were collected and were played for the other site on the next meeting date.

### Day 3 at HWES and Ridgecrest

The third day of art activities began with a presentation that included videos of the children and older adults introducing themselves to the other site. The university students alternated sites and opted to help where they had not been the previous week to become familiar with the different contexts. At both sites the university students discussed creating a collaborative mosaic that would be created from a combination of ceramic leaves and tiles that the older adults and children would create at their respective sites. I volunteered to assemble the mosaic onto a donated concrete slab for the sake of time and convenience. The choice was made to install the mosaic at the health/rehabilitative center where it would remind the residents of our intergenerational project and the idea that engaging with others through art can have a lasting impact or legacy.

The university students and I prepared for the day's activity by creating clay tiles. Each participant received a tile where they pressed an actual leaf into the soft clay leaving an impression. The leaf shape was then cut out of the tile. Some of the older adults enjoyed the activity to the point that they chose to make several clay leaves. Some of the elementary students extended their activity by making small characters from their left-over scraps of clay. At the conclusion of the activity the clay pieces were collected for bisque firing.



Figure 3. Imprinting clay tile reliefs

During the time that the older adults and children were working on their clay leaves we were able to connect the two sites using Google Hangouts, a video conferencing application. The participants were able to talk together and share encouraging words. Ms. Bessie from Ridgecrest, the health/rehabilitative center, told one of the children at the elementary school, “I love you” (B. McEntire, personal communication, October 25, 2017). I recall one of the

children telling an older adult that he was really looking forward to the last day of the project when he would be able to see the older adult during the planned field trip.

Both children and older adults exchanged names and a little about themselves through Google Hangouts. Alyssa, one of the university students, reflected that she thought the virtual sharing among participants helped the older adults recognize they could accomplish things equivalent to what they saw the children accomplish (A. Burleson, personal communication, November 29, 2017). Alyssa's reflection provides an example of service-learning in that she was discovering new things about older adults and video conferencing while providing a community service. Her comment about the older adults feeling accomplished suggests that she observed attitudes consistent with older adults making socio-emotional connections.

#### **Day 4 at Ridgecrest**

On the fourth day of the project the elementary school could not meet for our regularly scheduled visit due to testing. My university students and I however, went to the health/rehabilitation center as planned. It was on this day that we brought colored glaze for the older adults to paint their fired ceramic pieces. I also brought a variety of ¼ inch glass tiles to be glued to a paper backing for use on the collaborative mosaic. Jessica, the nursing student, said when the older adults were involved in gluing the glass tile pieces it was very difficult for many of them because of the fine motor skills required to regulate pinching and grasping the tiles. Nevertheless, she said, "the older adults stuck with the task," she added, "It was heartwarming" when watching their perseverance (J. Moore, personal communication, November 29, 2017). She came to appreciate the older adults' sense of pride and accomplishment when they assumed ownership of the challenge and pushed through to completion. While exercising perseverance was not a stated goal of the project tenacity may have been influenced by socio-emotional relationships. Jessica's reflection also indicates that her attitude changed toward the older adults' disposition.

#### **Day 5 at Ridgecrest and HWES**

On day five the university students provided a monoprinting activity for the older adults and elementary students. The participants were invited to select a color of printing ink as a background color. Using a brayer, they rolled ink on a piece of glass being used as a printing plate. Once the plate was covered in ink they lay several leaves upon the inked surface. Next, they placed a piece of drawing paper across the plate and rubbed the paper with their hands or a clean brayer. Then, they pulled the first print. Several participants flipped the leaves in the same approximate place and pulled a second print. Some of the older adults chose to add different leaves to their composition that had been printed with a contrasting color from the background. The leaf textures, colors and shapes that resulted pleasantly surprised the participants. Both the children and older adults eagerly tried their hand at making several of the prints. Rayven, one of the university students, commented that the activity captured the children's interests to the point that they wanted to continue the process rather than engage in an alternative activity with the iPad or talk to others using Google Hangouts (R. Hatchett, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

#### **Day 6 at Ridgecrest and HWES**

For many of the participants the final day of the project was their favorite and provided a special memory. Tavis, one of the university students said, "It was amazing seeing everything

come together. There was a sense of accomplishment and pride.” (T. Redmond, personal communication, November 29, 2017).



*Figure 4. Monoprinting Activity*

My university students and I met early at Ridgecrest Health/Rehabilitative Center to prepare the room. We hung artwork from both the children and older adults around our meeting place. Numerous prints, and leaf drawings adorned every available space including doors and end tables. In a prominent location our completed mosaic was on display. On an adjoining table we exhibited other ceramic leaves and small clay characters that the participants had made and would be able to take home as a remembrance. Cookies, cupcakes, chips and dips added to the party atmosphere. On a far wall we projected a running slide show of the participants' engagement with art activities from the previous five weeks of the project.

Jessica the nursing student who participated with us said, “All the ladies got dressed up for the last day’s party. They got dressed up and put on their lipstick.” (J. Moore, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

At the designated meeting time a school bus with Ms. Smith’s fourth grade class arrived. Also joining the celebration was a local newspaper reporter, one of the elementary student’s parents and the elementary school principal. Rayven recalled that when the children first arrived they went on their own to meet the residents (R. Hatchett, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

To aid in the children’s conversation with the older adults we lined up the children facing the older adults and played a speed-dating-type game where we gave the facing partners two minutes to share names and information about a favorite thing they liked to do. I overheard one of the elementary students tell his older adult partner that meeting her was a favorite thing for him. There was more than one person that I saw during the children’s conversation exchange who had tears in their eyes as they listened to the dyads share. Rayven said one of her favorite memories of the event was when the children were leaving Ridgecrest. She said for several of the children, “they came up and gave their artwork to one of the residents.” (R. Hatchett, personal communication, November 29, 2017).



Figure 5. Conversations between children and adults

### Focus Group

To determine what the intergenerational experience meant to the university students I held a focus group for conversation and reflection. The problem that I had asked my students to explore in the beginning of the project was how to develop intergenerational relationships using the media of art while building socio-emotional capital and fostering socio-emotional learning in the process. I was looking for evidence in the students' conversation that there had been changes in their attitudes toward the older and younger participants that may have been impacted by the intergenerational art experiences. I anticipated that attitudinal change would indicate relationship formation and its affect. Based on what I heard the university students say, ageist prejudices were apparent at the beginning of the project but then seemed to dissipate during the project.

Breanna said that at first, she had terrible anxiety about being with the older adults, but her feelings changed during the project as she became more comfortable with them. She said that she found joy in working with the older adults because they appreciated the university students' presence and activities they provided (B. Ballew, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

Tavis expressed his appreciation for the older adults in the project saying they learned to trust as demonstrated in their willingness to play with the technology and the iPads. Tavis added that the older adults wanted to know about him and they wanted him to know about them (T. Redmond, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

Jessica said that she learned to back off from helping the older adults too much in order for them to feel empowered (J. Moore, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

Alyssa agreed that she learned how to accommodate the different ability levels of the older adults and to continue to encourage them. "I loved going there," she commented. "I was excited about being there and knowing the residents would be excited as well." Alyssa said, "In the beginning I was nervous because I had never really been around someone older" (A. Burleson, personal communication, November 29, 2017). In reference to the children, Alyssa

commented with Rayven nodding in agreement that at first, they were terrified and scared of kids (A. Burlison, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

These comments suggest that the university students began the project with some trepidation about working with children and older adults but that after engaging with the participants in the art activities the university students changed their viewpoint toward working with others older or younger than themselves. No doubt the preliminary anxiety was partially due to society's propensity for age segregation.

In a recent survey (Gentile, 2017) less than half of American adults report they spend time with others outside their family that are much older or younger than themselves. The survey findings also stated that 61% of young people ages 18-34 have a limited number of much older or much younger acquaintances.

Two other questions that I hoped the project would explore dealt with fostering socio-emotional learning (SEL) and building socio-emotional capital. SEL is related to a student's ability to manage their own behavior, make effective decisions, maintain a positive self-concept and interact productively with others (Holochwost, Wolf, Wolfbrown, Fisher, and O'Grady, 2016). Comments from the focus group indicated that the university students engaged in SEL learning.

During the focus group Rayven mentioned a time that one of the elementary students was concerned about a peer being absent for a day of the project. The elementary student glazed the missing student's ceramic piece, so the artwork could be completed on time for firing (R. Hatchett, personal communication, November 29, 2017). This scenario illustrates an example of SEL because the elementary student cared for the welfare of someone else.

On a follow-up visit with Ms. Smith, the elementary teacher, she shared another example of SEL. She informed me that one of her students had told his Mom that he wanted to go visit some of his new friends at the rehabilitation center.

Two instances of student peer helping, and a student recognizing a friendship outside a student peer group document that SEL took place for the elementary students. Comments from the university students and the elementary students indicate that both the elementary students and the university students experienced SEL during our intergenerational art project.

Often, the socio-emotional theory attributed to older adults is socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992). Based on this theory older adults perceive that as they age they have less time left in life to build emotionally satisfying ties with others. The perception causes individuals to disregard acquaintances that may be peripheral and instead focus on relationships that hold more importance. This becomes problematic when existing friendships are reduced and there are few opportunities to build new relationships (Harrison-Rexrode, 2008). Loneliness, isolation and depression may result. In the Leaf-ing a Legacy project the older adults valued working with my university students and interacting both virtually and face-to-face with the elementary students. The following narrative describes Sylvia's, one of the Ridgecrest residents, engagement with intergenerational partners and demonstrates the art project built socio-emotional capital for the older adults.

It was three weeks after the project's conclusion that I visited with Sylvia. She told me that during the project she did things that she had never done before. She specifically mentioned applying ink to a glass plate and pulling leaf prints. She also recalled working with the ceramic clay. Sylvia said that she really enjoyed seeing the children and learned via Google Hangouts that the children were doing the same activities as what she was doing. She said, "We were so proud of that" (S. Schlipf, personal communication, November 27, 2017). Sylvia's comments solidify that she valued interacting with the art processes and considered her intergenerational relationships as meaningful ones.

### **Lessons Learned**

One surprising outcome of introducing technology to older adults was some older adults who chose to use the iPad drawing application to draw additional images in their free time. They used the layering technique with other imported photographs and some of the older adults freehanded images of their choice with added color.

I had hoped that during the project there would have been more virtual interaction between the older adults and young people. Technical issues were a hindrance as was the elementary school's privacy policy when it came to digital communication. The element of time was also a concern. The hands-on art activities took most of the participants' time during a class period; therefore, the students were more often focused on their art making rather than wanting to engage in conversation. If each student had been able to connect with an older adult partner on their own device as originally planned perhaps intergenerational conversations would have been less intrusive and more free-flowing. As it was, Ms. Smith and I circulated around the dual sites with our computers and encouraged each participant to stop what they were doing to talk with members from the other site.

More research needs to be done in this area to determine the validity of using virtual interactions for promoting intergenerational relationships. Virtual communication through a variety of platforms holds potential for intergenerational interaction that is not limited by geographic proximity. The potential benefits for all participants can only be imagined.

### **Leaf-ing-A Legacy**

Leaf-ing a legacy provided intergenerational art opportunities for a variety of ages across the life span demonstrating that lifelong learning took place for the oldest participant of 96 years of age to the youngest participant who was nine years of age. We shared stories, laughed with each other, struggled through new art processes and proudly celebrated accomplishments. We had a bond form through the common goal of making art. Some of the art was collaborative. Some was cooperative as older, younger and peers assisted in the act of creation. During our time together, we left an impression on one another. We discovered that we learned to empathize and care about each other; thereby, verifying socio-emotional connections. Our project was designed to fulfill an academic course with service-learning and a problem focus. Additionally, we benefited by investigating intergenerational art making as a means to pass on what was valuable. Who is to say whether traces of the experience will impact future generations and carry on as a legacy to influence others?

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