

Building Relationships: Art Making and Empty Bowls

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ABSTRACT

How can collaborative art making foster relationship building for those involved? A Problem Based Learning project that investigated food insecurity and the creation of clay soup bowls provided an answer for a number of students, and various community members. This article follows the story of a university professor’s involvement with her students in a partnership with a local intermediate school when they pursued an initiative to include art in their STEAM based curriculum dedicated to meeting a local need. Older adults, elementary students, and a variety of other interested individuals joined the effort and demonstrated how art can build relationships.

KEYWORDS

Problem Based Learning, Empty Bowls, Art Education

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An Artful Relationship

There is chatter. There is playfulness. Both artists sit at rectangular tables intent on their work. The younger one, an eleven-year-old Hispanic girl, smiles up at the camera. She continues to circle her clay bowl's rounded edge with her thumb and fore finger while she tells the interviewer her favorite food is spaghetti. The older one at least fifty years beyond the age of her counterpart, carefully pinches the fluted edge of her handiwork and announces to the videographer that she has created a soup bowl. The two artists are joined virtually while separated by time and place. Their common purpose through art making is digitally recorded and then shared with each as a means to help them engage together in an artful relationship.

Merriam-Webster (2019) identifies relationship as the state of having something in common, shared interests or efforts with synonyms including affinity, association, connection, kinship, linkage, partnership and collaboration. The two females mentioned in the introductory scenario were connected by their common experience of making ceramic bowls for a project named Empty Bowls, a grassroots endeavor to raise money to fight hunger (Blackburn & Hartom, 2007). The bowl makers' art engagement served as a catalyst to link them together, take part in an informative video about their art making project and have the opportunity to later meet in a celebratory event. While Lisa and Izzy's encounters may not continue as an ongoing association, their art experience was valued, promoting a relationship with social emotional benefits.

Holochwost, Wolf, Wolfbrown, Fisher, and O'Grady (2016) report that art activities foster a sense of belonging for students engaged in them (p. 17). St-Amand, Girard and Smith (2017) say that a sense of belonging is a basic need that leads people toward relationship building (p. 108). This article tells the story of how art was involved in building relationships. Art making was a vital ingredient for a number of individuals who collaborated together in an effort to solve a real-world problem on the local level—food insecurity. Art set the stage during the process of problem solving for not only impacting individual participants but also acting as an impetus for building sustainable relationships among community partners. How to solve a problem and build relationships through art making are questions considered in the following narrative. The article examines planning stages, curriculum standards, class assignments, exhibition events, and reflections. A constructionist lens supports the framework. There is not a predetermined way or definitive end result that was followed to involve art in the process of solving the problem of local food insecurity. Holochwost et al. (2016) explain that constructionist lens learning is a social, interactional process that takes place in various contexts. The authors suggest that to use this pedagogy in a classroom setting (1) a problem should be defined, (2) information should be gathered, (3) different points of view should be sought, (4) solutions should be developed, and (5) feedback should be conducted to determine how the solution met the identified needs (p. 113). These phases are not linear but may occur at different stages of solving the problem.

While the final outcome of how to tackle food insecurity was ill defined and somewhat unstructured in this story art was involved and relationships were built.

Planning Stages

It was early in the school year and a local intermediate school invited me as a university liaison in the area of art education to a round table discussion with several school personnel. During our meeting we framed a problem for students to solve. We used problem-based learning (PBL) as our outline. PBL is an educational strategy characterized by problem solving, integrated curriculum, and active learning (Savin-Badin, 2000). Often PBL favors the interaction of small groups working together to solve a problem of personal interest (p.21). We considered a problem that was trans disciplinary and related to subject content in science, technology, engineering, art and math. In the course of our discussion I mentioned that the problem of food insecurity might be an area to investigate since many of the students at the school were benefactors of the free and reduced lunch plan associated with being enrolled in a Title 1 school (Food Research & Action Center, n.d.). The problem of food insecurity directly related to the students' personal lives. I shared that the Empty Bowls project typically involves making ceramic soup bowls in an effort to raise money for local food pantries or a food bank. The conversation exploded. We discussed how the school could host a community event and provide soup for those in need, display artworks related to food insecurity and offer musical entertainment highlighting composers who had struggled with a personal need. We also talked about a *canstruction* sculpture made of unopened canned food that could later be donated to the food bank. We had the idea that the canstruction might resemble an 8-bit pixelated image of a food item and be created in collaboration between math and art students. We talked about social studies and language arts students becoming involved through poetry writing or study of the Great Depression. We also imagined the school's maker spaces working out prototypes for effective delivery of food items to and from a food bank. The excitement was palpable. We each left the planning meeting with an agenda of things to do.

My first task was to develop a relationship with a representative from the local food bank to gather more research about fighting hunger in our local community. I also planned to contact area schools and discuss the potential of working together to produce ceramic bowls for an Empty Bowls event that the food bank may want to sponsor. Art was leading the way for building community relationships.

Curriculum Standards

The National Core Arts Standards (2015) value the synthesis of relating knowledge and personal experience to making art (Anchor Standard #10) and relating artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context in order to deepen understanding (Anchor Standard #11). A project such as Empty Bowls has the potential to meet these national imperatives. I envisioned that while working with various school districts in the community

my university students who were training to become art educators could write lesson plans that fit the curriculum standards for visual art and share in a community wide experience such as the Empty Bowls project. I could see my art students teaching others how to make clay bowls while combining hand building techniques, personal experience and societal context in the process.

I contacted an area teacher who had welcomed my students into her class over several years. I met with Mrs. Smith, a teacher in the gifted and talented program (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.) from another school district and discussed the Empty Bowls project that the STEAM middle school in our same community was undertaking. She was very interested in promoting a similar art experience for her fourth and sixth grade gifted and talented students. Mrs. Smith recalled an intergenerational art activity that my university students had conducted in the past with her students. She felt that the art activities between her students and older adults at an assisted living facility had proved very meaningful for the students. She wanted to incorporate working with older adults again but this time through the Empty Bowls project. She suggested that we contact an area assisted living facility and I agreed to do so.

Class Assignment

My special problems in art education class seemed the perfect context to introduce an intergenerational component along with the Empty Bowls project. I was eager to suggest the challenge to my students during our next class meeting. Holochwost et al. (2016) found that art students have a significantly higher ability to try new materials and skills. They seek ways to make meaning, through art. They identify and develop their own ideas. Art students develop a sense of belonging. They are committed to setting and reaching goals in specific situations. They also have a growth mindset believing that with effort, persistence, revision and risk taking they can be successful (p.17). I felt confident that my future art educators would exemplify what Holochwost et al. postulated.

Two students enrolled in the class, Rayven and Mykala, were doing independent study work with me. Early on, we met to discuss class goals and student learning objectives. The two women decided that they would research information about our region's food insecurity and prepare a lesson introduction that they could use for instructing various groups with whom they would engage in making clay soup bowls. We brainstormed the names of partners and organizations we had previously worked with and others that we had heard may want to team with our university for art instruction. As we discussed the project more ideas bubbled to the surface. We already anticipated teaching the students in Mrs. Smith's classes. Also on our list for instruction were residents of the Villa Assisted Living facility including members of a memory care unit. Mykala said that she would like to introduce the Empty Bowls project to her sorority sisters on campus feeling like they would want to participate in the art making activity as a service project. We agreed to schedule a

bowl making session at the sorority house. We added plans to teach the hand building clay process to a faith-based women's recovery group as suggested by Mrs. Smith. We also talked about traveling to a local human development center to provide an opportunity to make bowls with individuals who had intellectual challenges. Working with this group resulted from an associational contact that I had with an art teacher at the facility. In addition to the bowls that would be made under the supervision of my future art educators I planned to invite several area schools to take part in the project suggesting that they could make bowls in their art classes or through their art clubs.

After discussing objectives for the special problems class Mykala, Rayven and I created a working schedule of where we would be from week to week. Over a period of 12 weeks Mykala and Rayven demonstrated how to roll and attach clay coils to make soup bowls to over 90 students. The university students typically introduced each lesson with a presentation about food insecurity and shared the goal of using art to help others. The university students told each group that they taught that there were many in the community who were working together with a common purpose. The teaching went beyond giving instructions in the hand building process to developing relationships and a sense of community.



Figure 1. University student leads clay bowl lesson

St-Alban et al. (2017) make six recommendations for positively influencing students to develop a sense of belonging at school. These suggestions correspond to building relationships with others.

- The first recommendation is to encourage active listening. This implies providing time, space and openness for students to express themselves.
- A second recommendation is to provide social support and effective teaching strategies.
- A third recommendation is to encourage cooperative learning tasks or teamwork.
- A fourth recommendation is to help students develop positive social emotional skills such as learning how to collaborate, communicate and negotiate; identify personal feelings toward self and empathy toward others.
- A fifth recommendation is to encourage students to develop common interests with their peers within the classroom.
- A sixth recommendation is to encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities that are related to a common interest outside of the classroom such as involvement in the arts (p.113-114).

These principles apply well to relationship building through art and specifically to what my future art educators were experiencing as they engaged with community members when teaching how to construct clay bowls for the Empty Bowls project. As my students taught others how to mold the clay into a bowl form they were engaging in active listening and providing for students to openly express themselves. My students were able to share their enthusiasm for the art making process and help their students experience success. These characteristics are related to St-Alban et al.'s (2017) recommendation of providing social support and effective teaching strategies to encourage a sense of belonging. My university students encouraged teamwork and collaboration among the art students that they were instructing. This was evident as they experienced their students' desire to help one another with the construction and glazing of their clay bowls. As my future art educators introduced art lessons, they encountered a variety of skill levels, physical dexterity attributes and ranges of intellectual capacity among students. Because of this experience they were able to identify their own personal feelings and empathize with others different from themselves.

Rayven reflected on her experience of teaching in the various contexts and said, "I've learned how to work with other individuals..." She also said, "The variety of populations helped me become more comfortable teaching in front of and talking to all ages. I got to experience the young, mid-life, and older students which was interesting, challenging, and rewarding all at once." In regard to what she saw develop within the students she taught she said, "It was interesting watching the students ... develop compassion towards those who are food insecure" (R. Hatchett, personal communication, December 8, 2018).



Figure 2. Older adult smooths clay for soup bowl.

Mykala made a similar observation about what she saw among the students she instructed. She said, “I personally loved this way of teaching. It helped our students learn more than just how to make a ceramic bowl.” Mykala also felt that she was helping to instill a lifelong lesson of helping others. (M. Lemmons, personal communication, December 9, 2018).

Both of my students recognized that engagement in the arts can foster meaningful experiences that influence feelings of belonging for the ones they were teaching as well as themselves.

The fifth and sixth recommendation that St-Alban et al. (2017) encouraged was for students to develop common interests inside and outside of the classroom with art activities being one of the suggestions. The Empty Bowls project aimed at solving the local problem of food insecurity used art making as a common denominator that brought people together within a classroom and beyond to impact a community.



Figure 3. Soup bowl glazed and ready for firing.

The Big Reveal

On the twelfth week of the Empty Bowls project a celebration was planned for the residents of the Assistant Living Facility, St. Bernard's Villa. Fired and glazed bowls from both the Villa's residents and Mrs. Smith's students were put on display for all to see. During the construction and glazing phase of the bowls my students and I took pictures and recorded the artists at work. We intended to create a media production that could be shown in a joint gathering on the final day of the project. During the process of making the bowls both the children and older adults were aware of each other and recognized that they were creating the clay soup bowls for a common cause. Both groups anticipated meeting each other during a field trip event where the students would travel to the assisted living facility. The Big Reveal is an example of how art educators can utilize their unique skills and opportunities to orchestrate flexible experiences in community settings to serve people of a variety of ages, abilities, and needs.

I arrived early at the theatre room at the Villa on the day of the Big Reveal to prepare for the celebration. Several rows of tables designated as seating for the older adults were lined with chairs facing a large video screen. Along the side and back of the meeting space additional tables were set up. I unpacked boxes of the handcrafted bowls and arranged them on the side tables. The back tables were laden with water cups and dessert plates. In addition to the ceramic bowls provided by Mrs. Smith's fourth and sixth grade classes she involved her other students who had not made the soup bowls by having them prepare refreshments for the party. They were bringing the snacks with them on the school bus and once they arrived would share their treats with the older adults.

Recreational therapists gathered some of the older adults to the theatre room prior to the start of our final event. Other residents often strolling in with walkers made their way past the displayed bowls to the sitting area. Most of the 15 residents who participated in the Empty Bowls art project were seated at tables and looked eager to begin the festivities. I welcomed them and explained that the children would be joining the group shortly. I pointed out that the residents' ceramic bowls were on display and that they were welcome to keep their bowl at the conclusion of the party for the cost of a donation to the Food bank of Northeast Arkansas or they could make it available for others who may want to make a donation. As it turned out all of the residents were able to keep their artwork due to one of the social worker's influence. She sensed the value of providing a tangible reminder for the older adults of their participation in the art experience. Woywod and Davenport (2013) say that an art product can be instrumental for individuals living with dementia or memory loss. It can trigger the feelings of productivity, engagement and belonging to a group. It can also help with the reconstruction of memories. Because several of the assisted living residents were also members of the memory care unit at the facility it was important for them to acquire possession of the soup bowl that they had made. Doing so offered another level of significance to the act of art making and relationship building.

After my welcome to the older adults and a few guests including a local television reporter the children's bus arrived and with it a current of excitement. It was not long before all of the empty spaces in the room were occupied with children from the elementary school. The room was overflowing with about 60 enthusiastic faces. I took advantage of having both older and younger generations together and introduced a Tic Tac Toe get acquainted activity. Each participant was given a game card and encouraged to find someone from a generation other than their own who could identify with a characteristic on the card. In keeping with the theme of food and hunger the card made statements such as, "find someone who has eaten birthday cake in the last 3 months" or "write the name of someone who lived during the Great Depression when there was food scarcity" or "write the name of someone who has eaten alligator". One of the older adults readily admitted she had enjoyed this unusual delicacy and shared about her experience. She further captured the attention of her listeners by showing pictures of her grown son posing next to an alligator. As individuals filled their card with the names of people in the room that identified with the card's statements they were rewarded with a piece of candy; but more importantly they were prompted to start a conversation with a new friend.

Following the game activity, we presented a video on the room's theatre screen that starred individuals from both the older and younger generations engaged in their art making process for the Empty Bowls project. Included in the movie were clips of students who shared information about the food insecurity problem in our community. In one clip all of the children on camera knew that one out of four children in Arkansas were food insecure. One of the movie's closing shots advertised an upcoming soup kitchen event and a luncheon

planned as a way to offer ceramic bowls to community members for donations to the food bank.

It was a couple of days after our Big Reveal event before I was able to visit Mrs. Smith's class at the elementary school. She greeted me with the news that the bowls her students made for the Empty Bowls project were being purchased by a local church and given to the students who made them. The gesture not only helped the hungry it also made it possible for the children to have a visual reminder of their art making experiences and the relationships prompted by them.

Soup-er Lunch and a Pop-Up Soup Kitchen

The next event on my art educator's schedule was an organized fund-raising lunch scheduled at a coffee shop near our campus. The proprietor had agreed to let my students display all of the bowls that they had gathered for donation from the numerous community organizations with whom they had worked. The coffee shop also agreed to donate a dollar for every bowl of soup that was sold during their lunch hour on that day. Taking on the role of art curator one of my students, Rayven, and I carefully chose and arranged the bowls for display. Often the presentation of artworks is overlooked as a process that can be compared to art making. Ventzislavov (2014) says curatorship is a fine art in itself. With this viewpoint in mind Rayven and I were experiencing another avenue for building a relationship based on our art activity as we worked together to display the soup bowls. A representative from the food bank joined us for the Soup-er Lunch event and accepted donations from coffee shop patrons who wanted to support the Empty Bowls project. All of the bowls that did not sell were carefully wrapped and boxed for the Pop-Up Soup Kitchen to take place later in the week at the STEAM intermediate school.

On the evening of the Pop-Up Soup Kitchen a host of children greeted visitors as they entered the double doors leading to the school's gymnasium. We were escorted through the gym and into the cafeteria where students manned the cafeteria serving line. We were given soup, bread and a dessert donated by volunteers. We were entertained by live guitar music and several songs by choir students. Children continued to bring additional desserts and bottled water our way if requested and offered seconds on servings of soup. The room was decorated with posters related to food insecurity and a pixelated image of a soup bowl made from unopened cans of food was displayed as a focal point in the room. Before leaving we were given a hand-made ceramic soup bowl as a reminder that many in the community are hungry.



Figure 4. "Canstruction" of soup bowl image.

The number of participants taking advantage of the free soup kitchen that night was minimal. The children had posted flyers around the neighborhood and advertised on the school marquee and in social media posts about the event but few people ventured out during the evening to take advantage of the opportunity. The crowd who did attend was primarily made up of teachers, administrators and parents of the children who were directly involved in the activities. The school principal did not seem disheartened by the turn out but openly praised and celebrated the students for their effort to make a difference and their compassion for being a part of something greater than themselves.

A couple of days after the Soup Kitchen the local food bank conducted their annual canned food drive. The canstruction made by the intermediate school was disassembled and donated to the effort. Shortly thereafter I delivered over 200 community made bowls to the food bank to store until they would be used for the food bank's first Empty Bowl luncheon scheduled to take place in the Spring.

Reflections

When the school term was over my two future art educators commented on their final exam that their time in the class had been meaningful and that they would carry the things they learned into their future classrooms. Their reflections mentioned relationships they formed as a result of teaching art among different ages and ability levels. As instructor for the course I considered the ways I saw art experiences bring people together during the semester. I recalled the initial discussion I had with community partners. Our decision to promote art making in the fight against hunger brought us closer together as a committee. I witnessed young people and older adults develop a bond through their common experience of making soup bowls. I noted the same bond between members of a class, sorority, club, organization and individuals develop as they engaged together to create art for a common purpose. While not all of the intended outcomes for the semester were realized the influence of art making on the development of relationships was a situation that was confirmed and celebrated. I can point to the experience of making soup bowls in the Empty Bowls project as an illustration of how making art collaboratively can foster the building of relationships for all those involved and the likelihood of maintaining future relationships among community partners.

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