

An Exploration of Restorative Artmaking During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This research explores a curriculum, delivered on Zoom, that blended art education with art therapy to support educators' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand the restorative aspects of collective artmaking and reflection. I established a series of artmaking workshops to educators via Zoom. As an artist/researcher/teacher, I made collages as an arts-based inquiry method. I found that participants needed a safe place to express, create, and share in a community of others who have similar needs, desires, and experiences, a respite

KEY WORDS

Therapeutic art education, online art experiences, restorative creative practices, self-care

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This research explores a curriculum that blended art education with art therapy to support educators' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand the restorative aspects of collective artmaking and reflection, I established a series of six artmaking workshops for educators via Zoom. I used a/r/tographic methods, including collage as inquiry, to analyze participants' experiences.

Foundations

This research project was grounded in an aesthetic encounter with art of our own making. Maxine Greene (1995) advised that participatory reflective aesthetic encounters with artmaking make us “aware of ourselves as...makers of meaning, as persons engaged in constructing realities with those around us” (p. 382). Greene asserted that such processes open a new dialogue about ways to change perceptions about individual and social experiences and ultimately imagine things differently.

Encounters

In the early, terrifying days of the pandemic, we all needed respite. Greene (1995) wrote that the arts allow us to explore the landscape of our existence regardless of state, time, or place. Feeling the stress of COVID-19 myself, I wanted to offer colleagues a safe place to explore the healing potential of art and community. In April of 2020, I posted an IRB-approved invitation to friends on Facebook. One art therapist, six school teachers (one pre-kindergarten, one math, and four K-12 art teachers), and six higher education instructors ultimately participated; all identified as women, aged 23 to 65.

The group met by Zoom six times over three weeks, making art and reflecting about the experience in conversation. I employed art therapy-inflected projects from my previous research (Helmick, 2019), including expressive self-portraits, collage mapping, affective identity, and self-mandalas. A typical meeting might entail:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Guided imagery meditation: | 10 minutes |
| Making expressive self-portraits: | 2 hours |
| Reflection/sharing: | 30 to 45 minutes |

Guided imagery meditation eased us into a comfortable space of sharing with one another. As Maureen Murdock (2013) wrote, “Guided imagery is a process of going within, focusing attention on breath and bodily relaxation and moving to deeper levels of consciousness where more images are accessible to the conscious mind” (p. 2). She found that it calmed participants and granted them a greater awareness of each other's feelings.

Conducting the sessions during the pandemic demanded flexibility. I did not want participants to have to go out to shop for art materials, so I encouraged them to use any art materials they had on hand.

I collected data by observing and participating in the artmaking, and video recorded the sessions as well. The participants' artworks were a valuable source of data. I also conducted semi-structured post-interviews with each participant. Classroom talk and interviews were transcribed for detailed analysis.

White Space

The workshops were designed to provide “white space” for the participating teachers. In the language of design, white spaces are areas of a composition where the viewer's eye can rest. Our virtual classroom offered a metaphorical white space where participants could find restoration, critical at a time when teachers' workplace and private spaces were bleeding together. Participant Orange (Figure 1) recalled:

The strangeness of the circumstances made it hard to concentrate. Quarantine removed boundaries between work, home, love, and play. But even though [the workshop] was at my own table, in my own home, I felt like I was escaping. (Orange, personal communication, May 13, 2020)



Figure 1. Participant Orange. Color pencil on paper.

Orange's self-mandala expresses both a sense of being bound and having the energy required to escape.

Participants often talked about their affective responses to the pandemic during the reflection period at the end of the session. One participant, Yellow, seemed to

speak for the group when she confessed, “I’m broken into a million pieces, everything is on fire, I’m in a cage and I can’t get out.” Participants shared fears about contracting COVID-19 and their experiences navigating isolation, loneliness, layoffs, and school closures.

Even in a time of restriction and worry, however, new opportunities bloomed. Participants articulated the value of making something, using their bodies to create. Purple (Figure 2) reflected,

I forgot how therapeutic it was to have that paintbrush in my hand. As soon as I put the paintbrush to the canvas, I remembered. I felt a calm sense of accomplishment after each session. I did something. I showed up. It was a pathway to a better mind-body connection (Purple, personal communication, April 17, 2020).



Figure 2. Participant Purple. Acrylic on paper.

Purple is not an art educator, but reported she loves to paint. This layered painting abstractly expresses reconnection to her artistic self. Purple’s words suggest that the workshops enhanced participants’ sense of agency during the pandemic, when much felt out of control. Furthermore, when COVID-19 made us anxious about our health, artmaking could recreate healthy connections to our bodies.

The online format also offered a certain degree of privacy, offering participants space to confront personal issues through artful expression. Yellow reported the meditation and the consequent artmaking “broke me in a good way (Yellow, personal communication, May 20, 2020),” opening her to reconsider difficult family relationships (Figure 3). Yellow’s mandala emerged from thinking she was always in competition and never quite enough.



Figure 3. Participant Yellow. Pastel and ink on paper.

Other participants valued the virtual classroom as a place to be together with others. At the outset of my research, I wondered how the virtual environment would affect participants' talk. Would silences feel awkward? In actuality, we took pleasure in hearing one other at work. Blue (Figure 4) marveled,

It was amazing how people can make the effort to connect when they want to. Nobody felt like they had to be talking the whole time. We would spend 15-20 minutes in our own world, listening to the sounds of others making, and you didn't feel like you were alone (Blue, personal communication, May 21, 2020).

We could hear paper rustling, pens scratching, paint being mixed, just as if we were working around a table together. Making art in the presence of others created community and connectedness.



Figure 4. Participant Blue. Collage on posterboard.

Blue's face appears in the center of her collage, surrounded with things she loves, including family, coffee, and listening quietly.

Openings

As an artist/researcher/teacher (Butler-Kisber, 2010), I conducted my inquiry with collage. I took four key concepts from Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), using collage to frame the context, express my perspective, navigate relationships among and with the participants, and search for patterns. Figure 5, for instance, presents several themes. Feathers evoke a soft, safe space to gather. Lines segregate areas, reflecting pandemic isolation. Drips suggest how our lives run together.



Figure 5. Helmick (researcher). Marker, color pencils, watercolor, pastels, and feathers on posterboard.

After the workshops, participants remarked that the experience was unexpectedly meaningful. Research confirms that creative activity can open us to self-care and empathy (Greene, 1995), and making art can reconnect us to ourselves and to humanity (Hutzel, 2007; Lawton, 2010). The workshops fostered a supportive community and encouraged everyone to feel less alone. As Margaret Walker (2018) asserted, “when artists work with and in a community, they not only are elemental in transforming the community, but the community is elemental in transforming the artists as well” (p. 42). In the white space of these workshops, educators could take off their armor, rest, and be restored.

Inroads

This project was a learning opportunity for me. It taught me to pay closer attention to demands placed on participants. Participants in this research were adjusting to teaching online, from home, often working, eating, playing, loving, all in the same place. In future iterations of this work, I will begin with conversation about arranging a dedicated space for art and meditation. I will also request feedback about the cost of participation. How much time could a participant reasonably afford to give to the project? Do they need a babysitter or caregiver while they are participating? What about the cost of materials? Getting answers to these questions would be a first step toward equity for all participants.

I have already begun to extend the practice described here as a model for professional development, and believe it offers real benefits for art teachers. I urge other educators to continue this exploration of restorative practices blending art education and art therapy, and to report their findings here.

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