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Enhancing Teacher Preparation Through Intergenerational-Based Service-Learning

Abstract

Like most art teacher preparation programs throughout the United States, practicum experiences that have pre-service students conduct classroom observations and deliver instruction to public school aged students are an integral component in our art education program. The addition of a service learning program at a local retirement community, as an alternative site for teaching, has contributed to substantial growth and understanding of art education as a lifelong learning process for our students and the residents whom they teach. Supported by both theoretical and practical concerns, this program addresses the inherent value of an intergenerational arts-based experience in a non-traditional art education setting. Intended as an outcome of service-learning, this teaching experience exemplifies contemporary art education practice(s) designed around the complexities associated with a 21st century art education.

Keywords

intergenerational experiences, service-learning, teacher preparation, art education

In 2007, a high school art teacher developed an intergenerational experience for students in her Photography II course. The idea to have her students spend time with residents in a retirement home came from her experiences as an undergraduate art education student at James Madison University. In the photography course, her students spend time getting to know the residents they are paired with, before taking their portraits. Finished portraits are displayed in the retirement community and given to the residents as gifts. The portrait project is more than just a photography assignment, it is an opportunity for students to move beyond the classroom and interact with the community. The teacher stated:

This project with the residents always reminds me that photography means something special to people. I look at hundreds of photographs a week and they just stare back at me and become work and things-to-grade. Seeing the residents get their photographs of themselves, they feel honored and beautiful. It reminds everyone that art is greater than us.

Like most teacher licensure programs, our students at James Madison University are required to participate in practicum experiences in public school settings. Initiated by a faculty member's commitment to lifelong learning, we began to ask; how can art education programs make the experience of learning how to teach meaningful, and reach beyond observations of classroom management, lesson plan writing, and discussions of art education literature? The answer came in expanding practicum experiences to include intergenerational service learning through collaboration with a local retirement community.

Changing Demographics

The reality of a growing aged population for U.S. and global demographics has never been more apparent. According to the Department of Health and Human Services,

Administration on Aging (2010), “persons 65 years or older numbered 39.6 million in 2009.... They represented 12.9% of the U.S. population, about one in every eight Americans. By 2030, there will be about 72.1 million older persons, more than twice their number in 2000” (p. 1). Based on the projected growth of older persons, the need for lifelong learning opportunities can impact educational initiatives at all levels. We should consider this significant change in demographics as a call to the field of art education to continue examining the ways in which we can reach out to older persons through meaningful art instruction to enhance both their quality of life and ours.

Intergenerational Art Making

In 2001, a need for art education students to work with the elderly at a local retirement home was established. The retirement community already had opportunities for residents to participate in make-and-take arts and crafts sessions. In contrast to typical pre-designed crafts, a program was designed to provide a service learning experience where art education students and residents collaborated through art making in meaningful ways. Our goal was to promote the idea and practice of lifelong learning through an intergenerational arts-based program. This goal aligns with calls for universities to broaden their outreach to outside communities (Seedsman, 2007).

Intergenerational is a term that can be used to describe two groups of people from different generations interacting together. In this case, our use of the term, intergenerational, refers to young adults working with senior citizens. Although the majority of intergenerational research is conducted in the fields of gerontology and sociology, research in intergenerational experiences or programs exists in art education (La Porte, 2003). Structured intergenerational arts-based experiences have been recognized as a valued component for learning and growth

(Alexenberg & Benjamin, 2004; La Porte, 2002; Sickler-Voigt, 2010; Stokrocki, 1988; Streitfield, 1976).

For both students and the elderly, intergenerational programs build social relationships and break down stereotypes of the young and the old (Cohen, 2006; Hopkins, 2000). Sherman (2006) describes the benefits of the arts for the elderly: “For older adults, the arts are often a language for communicating new ideas and acquiring new technical and interpretive skills. They help develop new ways of seeing, knowing, and experiencing...the arts can help express the complex essential issues of aging” (p. 43). Heydon (2007) suggested positive outcomes stemming from intergenerational arts-based programs, including language and literacy learning. Literature on intergenerational experiences (Heydon, 2007; Stokrocki, 1988) and service learning in the arts (Russell & Hutzler, 2007; Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004; Taylor, 2002, 2005) are present independently, and rarely within the same context. Studies that combine intergenerational arts-based experiences feature children and the elderly (Sickler-Voigt, 2010) or studio art students and the elderly (Alexenberg & Benjamin, 2004). This program is unique in that it brings together pre-service teachers and the elderly through art making, a topic that is limited within art education literature.

Service Learning and Teacher Preparation

For years institutions of higher education have been pursuing ways to extend their institutional mission, enhance student achievement, and increase student involvement in the community (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Felten and Clayton, 2011). Service learning is viewed as an innovative component in many areas of higher education including teacher preparation. The outcomes of service learning are in line with teacher training designed around the needs of 21st century schooling (Milbrandt, 2006). Research studies of service learning experiences in an

arts education context have encouraged changes in curriculum and associated practices (Buffington, 2007; Hutzell, K., Russell, R., & Gross, J., 2010; Innella, 2010; Krensky & Steffen, 2008; Russell & Hutzell, 2007; Taylor, 2002, 2005; Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004).

We agree with the definition of service learning based on guidelines developed by the Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, in which, Kraft (2000) explained that service learning is a recognized method of learning that results in students actively engaging with their community through collaborative processes. As an embedded part of the curriculum, service learning significantly builds upon the following student-centered experiences: meeting specific needs of the community, authentic processes of self-reflection, experiencing real-world situations, and, developing a caring sense for others. Similarly, Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service learning as:

a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Our intergenerational program fulfills the definition of service learning in the following ways. First, a need for art experiences in the retirement community was identified through contact with the activities coordinator of the retirement community. The retirement community includes a thriving group of residents who desire to spend time expanding their art experiences. The budget for activities in the visual arts does not allow hiring artists to teach in the retirement community on a regular basis. The need for free art instruction from persons skilled in studio practice made the collaboration an ideal match. Second, the program is collaborative. Each

semester begins with a social gathering in which students and residents negotiate what they will work on together. Third, students participate in teaching at the retirement community through the secondary methods of art education practicum, which is a credit-bearing course that all art education students are required to fulfill.

Reflection on the experience builds throughout the entire course. Students begin by identifying and recording their preconceptions and biases of the elderly, before ever entering the retirement community. Class discussions and written journals occur frequently during the semester. The course culminates with a final reflection documenting what students learned through the experience of teaching at the retirement community. Final reflections direct students to comment on what they learned that is applicable to all teaching settings as well as the greatest achievements and challenges they experienced. Through these questions students connect their reflections to the discipline of art education, course content, and civic responsibility.

The Retirement Communities and Classes

The setting selected in 2001 is a large, residential retirement community. The retirement community provides living space and a range of care options for over 800 residents. Residents live unassisted, in need of some assistance, or under full-time care. Some residents are designated as memory-care, which means they suffer from Alzheimer's and/or Dementia. The retirement community has two spaces dedicated to art activities. Class sizes vary each week due to residents' personal commitments and activity choices. A stable core of six women, who have participated in every art class we have offered for eleven years, provides a needed sense of dedication and consistency.

There is an average of 12 art education students each semester, who are divided into pairs. Each student pair teaches four consecutive classes. The retirement community consists of 12-18

residents participating each week in two activity rooms. Every semester the program is carried out over fifteen weeks. For the art sessions, art education students are required to organize and maintain the supplies, dedicate themselves to all processes of instruction, including set up and clean up, and demonstrate the sort of professional behavior expected of all students in the art education program. The retirement community or the university art education center purchases all of the supplies.

Components of the Intergenerational Program

The first day of class for the art education students begins with the usual student introductions and syllabi. It is during this time that students learn they will be working with the elderly as part of the course. After explaining to the class that they will be teaching art activities to senior citizens, we collect the students' first impressions of the program and record any biases they have before they learn more about the elderly. The students write responses to several questions addressing their preconceived ideas of the elderly and how they imagine the experience of teaching art to senior citizens will be, such as;

- Describe what you imagine the residents will be like?
- How do you think they will respond to your artwork?
- What stereotypes of the elderly do you have?
- What experiences have you had with the elderly?
- Have you spent time in a retirement community or nursing home? What was it like?

The following responses to the initial reflection, taken from twelve students enrolled in secondary methods, spring semester, 2010, are typical of the comments we have read from students repeatedly over the past 11 years.

Students responded to the question concerning what stereotypes they had of the elderly or retirement communities in different ways. One student suggested that the elderly were “disabled, slow, and not fun.” A second expressed that “they are old, dependant, rich, and have poor memory.” A third student responded that “they are either old and accept it and are happy, or, they are unhappy and make it known.” Another student anticipated that retirement homes “are always hot and there is usually a strict schedule.”

When asking students how they imagined the residents would be, one student thought that “they will appreciate our time and help, but some won’t want to do the activities.” A second student believed that “they will be very excited to try new things and become involved in art.” A third student predicted that the residents “might not like being told what to do.” A fourth student thought that the residents would probably “not connect well with the art or will not be interested in its deeper significance. They may even be offended by some of my work.”

After collecting the written responses and conducting informal discussions about their experiences with the elderly, but before the students are introduced to the elderly population with whom they will be working, a multiple-choice quiz addressing stereotypes of the elderly is administered to the students. *The Facts on Aging Quiz* (Palmore, 1977) enabled students to formally address previously held beliefs and misperceptions about the elderly. In this particular semester, it was interesting to observe students realizing such facts as “elderly people do not tend to become more religious as they age,” that “the majority of elderly people say they are seldom irritated or angry,” or “that aged drivers actually have fewer accidents per driver than those under age 65.” Taking the quiz often results in raising students’ awareness of the concept of ageism. Finally, students read *Conceptualising Practice with Older People: Friendship and Conversation* (Carter & Everitt, 1998). Carter and Everitt stressed that a “conversational” method of

implementation of program offerings resulted in programs being experienced as neither “therapy” nor “activity” in contrast to lessons implementing “make and take” (p. 95) type projects.

The first time the students enter the community, they see the facilities and meet the residents at a meet-and-greet social event the second week of the semester. The students and residents bring examples of their own artwork and ideas of materials or processes they are interested in teaching and learning. Introductions of all participants are made, and the students and residents have time to share their artwork and discuss what they will work on together during the subsequent twelve weeks.

The program then shifts to teaching art skills, images, and materials to the residents. The twelve weeks of studio production are divided into three, four-week sessions. Each session is lead by two students, one in each activity room, with all residents who wish to participate. In addition to demonstrating artistic processes and skills the students assist residents and share art images. Students are asked to bring at least one artwork or image to each session they teach. The images serve as a way to start conversations with the residents and build social relationships, as well as to increase the resident’s visual literacy. At the end of the twelve weeks of studio production the semester concludes with an art exhibition of all work that was made by the elderly with the student teachers. The retirement community hosts the exhibition for the artists, students and any other residents who wish to come. The students and residents share moments of reflection on what was created in the sessions and bring closure to the social relationships that were forged through art making. In total, for the fifteen weeks of the program each student will have spent a minimum of six hours with the residents. Some students have volunteered their own time to return to the retirement community to visit residents they have bonded with, to help

residents work on projects outside of the organized sessions, or to volunteer in other capacities after the art education program has ended.

Reflective Journals

Use of self-reflective journals by pre-service students during their practicum fieldwork is an effective assessment tool, and a means for actively addressing the complex issues which pre-service students face as they progress through art education coursework (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995; Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010; Ross, 2012; Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004; Zimmerman, 1994). In, *Assessing Learning in Service-Learning Courses Through Critical Reflection*, Molee et al. (2010) describe the DEAL model of critical reflection. The acronym DEAL comes from the three steps of the reflection process, which are Describe, Examine, and Articulate Learning. The three-step reflection process of the DEAL model moves students from describing their experience to explaining its relationship to course objectives and finally to articulating what has been learned. DEAL model reflections should include reflections on academic advancement, personal growth and civic engagement. In the art education classroom at the university, students are engaged in discussions about the art sessions at the retirement home at least every other week. Beyond the informal class discussions, students complete a minimum of three formal journal activities. The first journal entry is recorded before going to the retirement community, followed by a reflection at mid-term. Final reflections are submitted at the end of the experience. The journals and discussions cover all three areas of the DEAL model of critical reflection.

Program Effectiveness

To determine the meaning and value of the program in the minds of the participants after eleven years of collaborating with the retirement community, we analyzed student reflective

journals, interviewed residents who had participated for more than one year, and interviewed staff at the retirement community. Common themes in what students documented they learned from the experience, what residents appreciated about the art classes, and staff member's views of the program provide evidence that the program has positive impacts on both students and residents.

The service learning experience with the elderly residents resulted in many students speaking positively about their forming teacher identity. Common themes in student journals responses related to teaching include:

- Increased level of patience when working with others
- Learner motivation and encouragement
- Recognizing individual needs
- Lesson presentation

When asked how working with the residents informed their actual art teaching practice, one student responded, "its helped me retain an open mind and to not forget that no matter the age group, everyone in that group is different and will approach art individually and with different personalities." Another remarked, "now I want to be more involved with my students and speak to them about what their making." A third student realized that "it reminded me that everyone is at a different level in terms of visualizing, planning, and creating. It reminded me that some people need extra attention and motivation in order to get started." Students also found that their work with the residents taught them "not to be quick to judge student ability" and enabled them to recognize that "they may have to reiterate processes multiple times before its understood" or that "different students have different needs."

One question we asked the art education students was, what did you feel was the most valuable aspect of making art with senior citizens? Many students responded about learning practical teaching skills like the comments quoted above. Because they are art education students their thinking was focused mainly on the practical applications of their learning. A few students responded with thoughts about what they and the residents gained from the experience, such as pride. For example, “[the residents] got to create things they could be proud of and enjoy making.” Another student valued the changes in the residents through the sessions: “It was great showing them that they could still make art at an older age. Many times some of them would say ‘I am too old to make that’ but once they finished they were proud of themselves.”

The most common student response related to social aspects of the experience is that they enjoyed the companionship more than the art making. The most valuable aspect of the experience for one student was “learning the background stories of the senior citizens, and interacting with them as they created art pieces.” Students also commented on the residents enjoying the personal relationships. For example, one student responded:

The most valuable thing I learned from [the retirement center] was that learning is a lifelong process and art is a great way to reconnect to memories and to form new friendships. I was impressed with the openness to new ideas. The art making was not the most important part, but instead the stories that the residents told and our friendship through art making. I also learned that anyone, at any age, can learn from someone else.

Staff and Residents’ Perspectives

Residents who have participated in the art classes for more than one year were asked to participate in an interview about their experiences in the classes. From the ten residents in the class in 2010, only three consented to participate in an interview. All ten residents continued to

participate in the classes for the semester. The three residents who participated in the survey were asked how long they had participated in the university art classes, what types of art making experiences they had in their lifetime, and what they feel is most valuable about the art classes with university students.

We learned that residents had limited access to art instruction as children but had many personal art making experiences including traditional crafts such as quilting as well as fine art practice, like painting. All three residents who were surveyed had participated in the classes for at least four years. When asked what she valued about working with the university students, one resident talked about different projects and liking to try new things. As she talked she clarified what she likes about the program. She said, "I enjoy trying to make new things and doing a little bit of our own thinking, what we are going to do with it and making them different." The resident went on to talk about enjoying having the freedom to make decisions about her own artwork as opposed to having to complete tasks similar to the way art activities are presented in the retirement center when the university students are not teaching.

A second resident spoke about appreciating learning new skills and spending time with the students. She commented, "I sort of feel like they are my granddaughters.... I mean it is just the little things they say that is [*sic*] wonderful." While the number of residents willing to be interviewed was low, we view the fact that the rest continue to come to the art classes every year as an indication that the classes have a positive impact.

In addition to the opinions of the students and residents participating in the classes, we wanted to know how the activities staff members at the retirement community perceived the program. Two retirement center staff members were interviewed to gain a better perspective on how the intergenerational arts-based program impacted both themselves and the residents. The

activities coordinator stated that the program's direct effect on building the residents' self esteem, combined with an opportunity for them to connect with our students, is beneficial. She also suggested that the program breaks down the negative stereotypes often associated with retirement communities, such as, residents exhibiting general apathy or a resistance towards new experiences.

When asked if the residents' concept of art has changed due to their involvement in the program, both staff members stressed that many residents have grown to think of themselves as artists. Also, the results of the program have enabled both residents and staff members to better understand differing types of art and ways to think about the arts in their lives. A question regarding the benefits of the art program on memory-care residents revealed that several family members of memory-care residents have expressed support of the arts program. For example, it was shared that during a printmaking experience, a memory-care resident created a linocut image of a house. When asked about the image, the resident expressed that it was of her childhood home. One of the resident's family members researched the shape of the home and discovered that the printed image was accurately depicted. For this particular family, having their parent involved in an experience that allowed them to tap into their memories was significant. Working with memory care residents can be considered therapeutic. But because our institution does not offer degrees in art therapy, and none of the art education faculty have art therapy certification, art experiences are viewed and discussed as art making and not in terms of therapy.

When asked to describe areas of growth seen in our students as a result of their work with the residents, both staff members observed that some students come into the experience with trepidation and end up blossoming as instructors. One of the staff members was particularly impressed with those students who committed additional time with residents outside of the

scheduled practicum. Overall, both staff members observed our students working well together, and being successful in encouraging more growth out of the residents. In terms of growth, the interview with staff members brought to light the need to continually consider the parallel experiences that occur between our students and the residents. In other words, as instructors we should avoid the mindset that the students are the only ones making adjustments in their work with the residents.

Conclusions

The integration of service learning, as promoting necessary skill-sets for new teachers, is valuable for our art education program at James Madison University. While working in the retirement community, university students are challenged to learn how to teach to a wide range of abilities. Creating accommodations, building rapport, establishing trust, encouraging resistant learners, and flexibility are all qualities that the university students practice when working with the residents that will be directly applicable to their future teaching. By acquiring these skills through service learning, students also experience the benefits that make service learning unique. Engaging in the larger community beyond the university campus is an opportunity presented by service learning. Working on a project that requires collaboration with diverse groups of people reduces stereotypes for all parties involved. Working together toward a common goal fosters the creation of social relationships between people who may not have interacted without the service project.

In addition to increasing practical skills related to teaching students formed social connections with the residents. The students and residents enjoyed spending time together and talking about making art and getting to know each other. Students noticed that residents gained confidence in their art skills and were proud of their accomplishments. Perceptions of the elderly

were changed for students as a result of working together. One university student was so moved by her first classes working on a mural with the residents that she devoted more than twenty hours to the mural and visiting the residents. In her final journal, she recounted the most memorable experience she had at the retirement community:

On my way to work on the mural I noticed one woman sitting in the hall near the room where we were working on the mural. I said hello and she instantly started smiling. As I continued to talk to her she reached up and grabbed both of my hands and just held them in hers without saying a word. I wheeled her in to see the mural and as she looked up at it she said, 'I remember' and smiled.

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