

Student-led art allows students to work with others, take pride in their achievements, and build their self-esteem, as seen in this author's experience teaching in rural South Africa.



The farm's name hangs askew from a tall post, backlit by the approaching dusk. A thicket of eucalyptus rustles as a gust of stinging sand sweeps across the fields. A cluster of five strange men lurks behind the trees. Three giggling children traipse down the road, unaware, laden with sacks of maize meal, cakes, and cuts of beef. The hum of evening is cut, abruptly, when the bounty—a month's groceries—is seized by a gang of thieves.

LEARNING to LEAD: Lessons From a Farm Village

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This tense scene is staged by my students' dynamic, life-size artwork. Black cut-paper silhouettes, starkly displayed on white paper, reveal the grim tale (Figure 1). The artwork's narrative is based on secrets provided by the community; its conflict remains unresolved. The students have asked their audience—composed of community participants—to generate a positive resolution by adding a final scene to the artwork.

Students take their positions. They politely greet arriving guests by the art center's door. The students are anxious to start. Thabang turns down the music. Bonolo tweaks a curtain. The door closes as the students assemble at the front. Mpho is self-assured. A massive grin spreads across Thabang's face as he introduces the group. Struggling to be the center of attention, he nervously covers his eyes.

This is the culmination of 10 weeks of hard work. Over the course of preparing and leading this workshop for their community, my students revealed a heightened understanding of collaboration and demonstrated self-empowerment through self-reflection, as well as pride and passion for their artwork. Experience over these weeks showed me that supporting opportunities for student leadership can enable rich, complex results in the art classroom.



Figure 1. A student questioning community participants.

The Farm Village

Each kilometer south marks more distance from vibrant Johannesburg. Smoke stacks, the electric grid, and freeways are replaced by charred fields, cattle, and the derelict windmills of the Free State province. The road's surface crumbles with potholes. A dozen kilometers from the local town, the maize farm is tucked behind a vast pond. I first made this drive several years ago, as a wide-eyed American volunteer for the nonprofit arts organization Dramatic Need, which offers expression-based workshops to at-risk, rural youth and children (Figure 2).

In 2010, as an educator and manager, I was given the opportunity to further Dramatic Need's mission to provide a nonviolent, creative outlet for self-expression. I settled next to the colorful arts center in the heart of a small village on the farm, surrounded by a handful of my students' homes.

Families have lived in the village for generations. Until the fall of apartheid, the farm provided housing to most of its laborers. Because of rising labor costs and mechanization, many families now face underemployment. While the national unemployment rate of South Africa hovers around 24%, the people of the Free State suffer a distinctly rural plight, with a 35% unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa, 2014). I lived on the farm for almost 3 years and noticed the residual impacts of oppression and ongoing hardship, including economic disadvantage, health crises such as HIV and tuberculosis, a strapped education system, and a lack of upward mobility in the local workforce.

The Saturday Class

In this rural area, few opportunities exist for identifying leadership potential and honing unexposed leadership skills. As a teacher at Dramatic Need, I decided to form a Saturday class with adolescent farm residents. I invited children 11-15 years old to join, indicating that lessons would culminate with their leading an art workshop for their community. Our class of 6 students met for 3 hours every Saturday for 10 weeks. Of the 11 national languages, students spoke a mixture of two: local Sesotho and isiXhosa. These students had participated in a variety of workshops I had taught previously and often engaged with me outside of class in my garden; we entered into this new undertaking with a foundation of trust and understanding.

Leadership in Context

South Africa is infamous for its legacy of impeding inequalities, even in the post-apartheid era (Figure 3). Fingers point toward lack of leadership on numerous levels, from top-elected representatives to union workers to teachers.

Today's youth live in a more fragmented society than previous generations involved in the freedom struggles (Dubula, Nkondlo, & Pelsler, 2006). Confusion surrounds today's framework of freedom—where political strife, corruption, and lack of governmental responsibility cloud the idea of what leadership means. The art classroom is a venue for generating new perceptions of leadership. As bell hooks (1994) affirmed:



Figure 2. Dramatic Need's Piet Patsa Community Arts Centre. Used with permission of Dramatic Need .

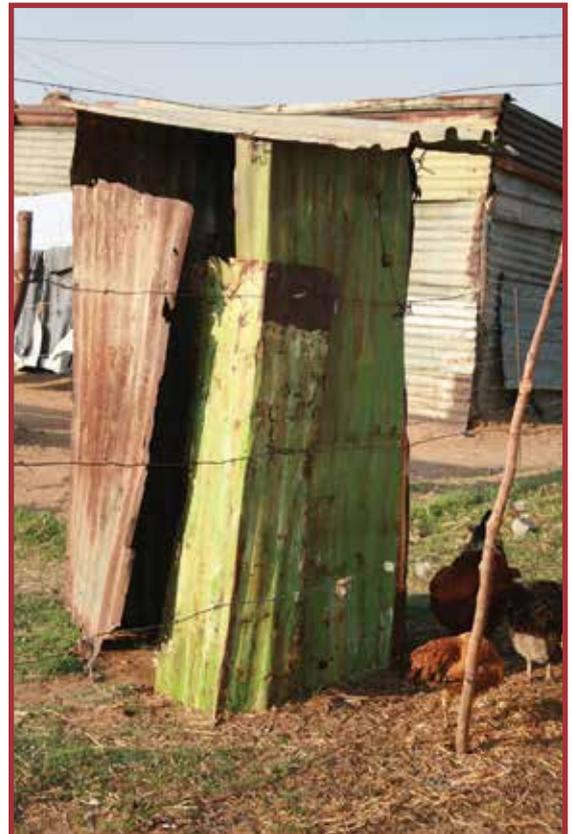


Figure 3. Lack of sanitation is one of many inequalities.

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves, and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. (p. 207)

Activating the space of art classrooms for students to develop community among themselves can have broad implications for life beyond the classroom. A few weeks into the Saturday class, one ebullient youth, Bonolo, intimated how she interacted with younger children: “When I shouted at them, they would shout back.”¹ Mpho, a confident speaker, indicated her competitiveness: “Every time I wanted to be the best and biggest. When someone would come up with a plan... I would always insist mine is right even if I knew someone else had a better answer.” Gude (2007) advocates, “Young artists must also learn to construct new spaces in which caring, courageous communities can emerge” (p. 13). By connecting the problems of the bigger picture to my local community, I hoped my students would be able to recognize their facility as leaders. I endeavored to understand their perceptions of themselves as leaders before, during, and after leading an interactive art experience. My definition of leadership evolved throughout; based on Thurber and Zimmerman (2002), I identified an empowered leadership model—an empowered leader maintains collaboration and caring while working toward a common purpose (pp. 19-20).

Planning for Leadership

Within my learning unit, one of my main aims was facilitating collaborative practices to create opportunities for students to build the self-esteem required to lead a workshop together in front of family, peers, and neighbors. Early in my planning, I entitled the culminating workshop an “interactive art experience,” which incorporated student-guided audience interactions with their silhouette artworks. I focused the unit around the Big Idea of conflict, which tied directly to the need for resolution explored in the approach of Forum Theatre (UNESCO & CCIVS, 2006; Walker, 2001). Since my students faced measurable real-world conflicts, I wanted to link a concept in art that could enable reflective and critical thinking in their own lives. I prepared my students

to present a narrative artwork based on community-generated narratives; when leading the interactive art experience, this allowed them to explore a deeper connection with their community, to whom the artwork was shown.

An Interactive Art Experience

I first discovered Forum Theatre in Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed² and heard of its success in communities affected by HIV and AIDS. “The purpose of Forum Theatre is to create a space where all people have the possibility and the right to be heard” (UNESCO & CCIVS, 2006, p. 7). Forum Theatre is a participatory model of drama presenting real-life scenarios for spectators to contemplate. A group of actors present an oppression-based conflict through a play, which ends without a resolution. After the conflict is presented, the actors dialogue with the community audience to find various solutions for the conflict; often this dialogue inspires transformative, everyday problem solving.

I wanted to apply Forum Theatre to visual arts forms as a way to invite audience participation in the student-led workshop. When I introduced the students to the artwork of Kara Walker, a contemporary artist who often employs themes of conflict, we formed a connection to the use of conflict resolution in Forum Theatre. The use of silhouettes in Walker’s work formed a practical connection for students, enabling access to create more complicated structures through simple shadow projections. It occurred to me that silhouette tableaux, created with shadow projections on a white sheet by performers, would allow a flexible, quick way for community members to participate in resolving the students’ artworks. The use of silhouette tableaux was an aesthetically feasible device for the audience to engage with the students’ original cut-paper artworks.

Community-Generated Narratives

During the unit, I prompted the students to collect anonymous community secrets to inspire their own artwork. This approach was based on McConaughy’s lesson—Hopes, Wishes, and Regrets—and Frank Warren’s popular Post Secret project (Hafeli & McConaughy, 2010, p. 129). Including the collection of secrets in the unit design enabled two possibilities: First, the students were able to incorporate their audience into their artistic process, enabling them to close the gap between artist and audience, a



Figure 4. Students solicit the community for anonymous secrets.

Problem solving in groups often means confronting tough questions and complex life issues...

relationship not dissimilar to that of leader and followers. Second, this allowed students to generate ideas pertaining to their community's issues. Gude (1990) has stated that teachers need to be flexible in separating their own values and beliefs to enable conscious choices in curricular and teaching selections (p. 28). By putting the content and meaning of the artwork in my students' hands, I was able to minimize my involvement in framing their lessons from my point of view, allowing them to frame their own choices.

When I introduced students to Warren's Post Secret project, we discussed concepts of anonymity, loyalty, and trust. My students wrote letters to their community, soliciting their secrets—explicitly noting that the secrets might be used as the premise for a public artwork. The students emphasized that the secrets should be submitted without names and would be treated confidentially. Two students taped together a small box, leaving a thin opening where folded secrets could be slipped in. The students provided each household with a letter and displayed the sealed box (Figure 4). They then trotted away, giving each household a few days to ponder their secrets.

The following Saturday, we eagerly opened the box. Before performing analysis, we recalled our vow to keep the content of the secrets safe. The students were aware of the precious nature of the community's trust, yet they were curious about the identity of each secret's author. Folded paper slips revealed simple wishes, while others exposed very sensitive life stories. Many disclosed personal struggles. We reviewed the idea of conflict and grouped the secrets accordingly.

In preparation for creating a collaborative artwork, each student chose a conflict-oriented secret that moved him or her. The secrets included loneliness, personal injury, and robbery. As a group, they merged their various secrets into one narrative and explored the narrative in a sequence of three artworks.

Cutting, Constructing, and Leading Together

From collaborative exchanges, students learn to test their own ideas of self with those of the larger group and to connect with new perspectives (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002; Hafeli & McConoughy, 2010; Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, & Agbhari, 2004; Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland, & Palmer, 2009; Stephens, 2006). Learning to relinquish personal desires and working toward a common goal allowed them to transcend to a new level of maturity. One student, Mpho, reflected after the final interactive art experience:

No one wanted to be perfect—when someone had a problem, we would help them, and afterward we would make sure there were no hard feelings. When we went home, we asked each other if anyone had a problem—everyone was fine.

It becomes easy to follow narrow-minded personal agendas when one is not interrupted by different perspectives (Gude, 1990). Collaboration is not a simple task, yet it lays the groundwork for a deeper learning experience and builds the foundation for a richer sense of community. When working in a group, students become more aware of others' needs. Contemplating the takeaway value of our classes, Thabang shared that he learned to listen to others, respect different views, and treat people well regardless of personal connections. Bonolo learned lessons in respect and reconsidering personal authority: "I will take away that we must respect each other and not shout at each other. When we make a problem, we can fix it altogether. And we cannot fight and can't tell someone, 'No, don't do that.'"

Collaboration best occurs when students are given opportunities to interact with one another through discussions and the common goal of problem solving. The class was designed to give students opportunities to work together often. By building a sense of community through collaboration, I aimed for the students to feel supported by their peers when leading others in the final interactive art experience. The student artwork was a collaborative effort from beginning to finish. The scale of the artwork necessitated a group effort (Figures 5 & 6). Sharing their artwork with their community also meant that students had a passionate desire to take part in the art process.



Figure 5. Peers work together on layout.



Figure 6. Collaboratively hanging their artwork.

I found that collaboration came naturally to the students when they were working to share their knowledge. Milbrandt et al. (2004) urged teachers to facilitate student ownership of their problem solving by presenting questions to their classmates, enabling the classroom community to participate in creating possible solutions (p. 24). The result of peer teaching and support during problem solving is that students learn to empathize with their peers in profound ways (p. 23). Problem solving in groups often means confronting tough questions and complex life issues; when students battle their way through collaborative discussion, they connect with authentic concerns (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002).

Collaboration is not seamless or easy. Skirmishes and tattling often derive from students' interactions with different opinions and a variety of agendas. During one class, I noticed Thabang's expression—stern with a furrowed brow. I opened my mouth to speak, and his face crumpled. As two fat tears rolled down his cheeks, he buried his head in his arms on the table. As can often be the case in a multilingual environment, the clash between Thabang and Mpho unraveled before I grasped how it had started. As it turned out, a squabble had erupted when students did not share their supplies with one another.

The two students engaged in reflection and apology later on; having a class goal to lead a workshop for the community prompted them to resolve their frustrations and to humbly put aside self-serving needs. The students were advocates of working together. After the final interactive art experience, Thabang shared, "That evening the group worked as a team. There weren't any misunderstandings. The successful part was our teamwork."



Figure 7. Students strategize collaboratively.

Finale

Crisp silhouettes announce the first part of the students' constructed story as the audience bears the summer's waning heat. Bonolo opens a discussion about the first of three artworks (Figure 8). Bonolo's primary role is to ask questions and to involve the community in reading their visual story. At times, Bonolo struggles to elicit the answers she desires from the audience, but she is patient. At one point Mpho steps in with a suggestion to redirect the audience to the focus of the artwork. The community is talkative and vibrant. The momentum of the evening is palpable. The audience completes their silhouette tableaux (Figures 9 & 10). Panting with exhilaration, everyone takes their seats for the closing discussion of the evening.



TOP: Figure 8. Bonolo introduces the interactive art experience.



MIDDLE: Figure 9. The audience considers a possible ending to the students' artwork.



BOTTOM: Figure 10. The audience resolves the artwork through shadow projections.

Emerging Student Characteristics

Change. Self-reflection. Awareness. Consideration. Pride. Passion. These words peppered my notes increasingly as I worked with the students. Thabang shared his acquired self-confidence and focus through group work. Bonolo revealed learning to follow through on her statements with action. Mpho became increasingly reflective: "I didn't set a good example for others to follow. I was just the leader that I told myself I was." She became aware that self-reflection takes conscious thought and time, specifying, "Something changed because I was giving my followers time to speak and to hear what they feel. But before, when I was speaking with my followers, I didn't care how they felt or what their ideas were." The combined process of working together and leading the interactive art experience enabled my students to have deeper insights into themselves, cultivating budding pride and passion for their artwork. On our last night, Mpho declared, "It was a great pleasure for us to have you as participants because it was a chance for us to change roles." They were proud to have shared their work; more importantly, this evening stamped an unparalleled sense of achievement in their art experience.

"We taught them something they'd never known before," Bonolo shared. Milbrandt et al. (2004) recommended that educators give students opportunities to share their knowledge in formal and informal capacities (p. 24). In our conversations together, the idea of sharing their learning with the elder community was completely new to the students. Mpho told me that her grandmother had held low expectations and was greatly surprised by the outcome. Not only did the interactive art experience mark new learning territory for the students, but it also advocated the importance of arts learning within the community. Bonolo revealed, "They were so appreciative of us. They said we are great and they said they will never say that we aren't allowed to go to the arts center again."

Implications

The lessons learned from the Saturday class spawn many lingering questions for future consideration in art education. How can collaborative practices in art classrooms impact student capacity for taking on leadership roles? How does ownership of knowledge influence students' desires to share their learning with others? How might this contribute to student perceptions of leadership? In what ways can interactive art experiences be used to advocate for art? What other lessons could be learned from inviting community participation in student artwork?



Figure 11. Classmates counter-balance in a collaboration game.

Building opportunities for student-led art events, like the interactive art experience, can impact students' capacities to work with others, take pride in their achievements, and build upon their self-esteem. This, in turn, can help to construct healthy classroom communities in South Africa. Similarly, there are global and cross-curricular indications that opportunities for student leadership can benefit other cultures and non-art classrooms. Presently, limited research-based literature focuses on student leadership opportunities, presenting a ripe prospect for teacher-researchers to explore.

Students need opportunities to define and practice leadership, reflect on their own capacities as leaders, collaborate noncompetitively with others, and engage as leaders in projects about which they are passionate. The emergence of student collaboration, self-reflection, and pride is an exciting consequence of promoting leadership opportunities in art classrooms.

Smiling broadly, the students conclude the evening in joint song. The melody blends into strains of humming, clapping, and stomping—mirroring the audience's appreciation. The night comes to a close as participants sashay out the door.

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AUTHOR NOTE

The research for this article was conducted as part of the author's Master of Arts in Art Education degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). More information about the charity, Dramatic Need, and opportunities for volunteering is available at www.dramaticneed.org

ENDNOTE

- ¹ All personal communication, observations, reflections, and interviews are from August 2012 to January 2013. The research for this article was conducted as part of the author's Master of Arts in Art Education degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA).
- ² See www.theatreoftheoppressed.org