

Art educators form a do-it-yourself professional learning community by meeting informally in a museum to view exhibits, collaborate, brainstorm, and dialogue.



# Do-It-Yourself Professional Learning Community

LINDA WHELIHAN

**M**y dining room table was covered with a kaleidoscope of colored papers, felt, markers, and wire. The available materials all related to artwork on exhibit at our local contemporary art museum. Gathered around the table, our cohort of four elementary art educators reached for supplies, nimbly manipulating them and responding to the work we viewed an hour earlier at the museum. As Henri Matisse remarked, "Creative people are curious, flexible, persistent, and independent with a tremendous spirit of adventure and love of play."<sup>1</sup> In our classrooms, we encourage these traits in our students by setting up supplies and facilitating discussions that lead to inquiry and discovery, but how often do we make time to nurture ourselves through such artistic explorations? **Our group had come together to form a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) professional learning community, taking initiative to craft situations that would allow us to share our teaching experiences and to grow both artistically and professionally.**

The DIY movement, originally aimed at encouraging the can-do spirit of the intrepid homeowner, has expanded its reach and is now mentioned in books, TED Talks, and discussions referring to ordinary people directing their passion and dedication toward solving a whole host of challenging global issues including hunger, poverty, and education. As a teacher, I felt the need for professional engagement that I was not experiencing in my workday or as part of my district's scheduled professional development days. Prompted by a graduate course I was taking on the study of qualitative research, I contacted three other elementary art educators and invited them to join me in forming a DIY professional learning community where there would be opportunities for artistic investigation, discussion, and collaboration. Educators have adopted the term *professional learning communities* to describe collaborative groups within schools that meet regularly across grade levels and disciplines for reflective dialogue addressing concerns of the school community. Coming together once a month, we formed a supportive learning group—our own version of a professional learning community, independent from the prescribed protocol of professional development at our individual schools. In this article, I describe our collaboration and discuss the insights our successes might provide for art educators' professional development practices in the future.

Professional collaboration, as defined by Leonard and Leonard (2003), "is considered to occur when teachers work together regularly, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for achieving educational goals—that is, principally in terms of improved student learning" (p. 3). I thrive in collaborative environments, but my jam-packed daily schedule leaves me little time to interact with fellow educators within my school. Most of my conversations about cross-curricular connections occur when I run into classroom teachers as I am racing down the hallway, artwork shoved under my arm and pushpins in the corner of my mouth. Because I am the only art teacher at two small Vermont schools, discussions about curriculum and current trends in pedagogy are nonexistent. I felt disconnected,

overscheduled, and uninspired. Acting on my desire to connect with my peers, I approached other art teachers about joining me in an experiment in collaboration where we could do just as Leonard and Leonard prescribed: share, contribute ideas, and work toward the development of a unit of study that would be relevant to our students. Beyond that, I was hoping to invigorate my own teaching practice and to strengthen the larger community by fortifying the ties among teachers, students, and our local contemporary art museum. Our meetings would begin at the museum and have follow-up time at my home to share insights, make curricular connections, and learn from one another.

Our trial collaboration took place one Sunday afternoon per month for 3 months. I served dual roles as a participant and facilitator, setting up times and dates and sending out reminders for our meetings. We met at the museum, toured the exhibits, and brainstormed. We spent time studying the art, using it to inspire our discussions and investigations of materials. Our collaboration varied in some ways from more traditional professional development activities, and I believe that those differences contributed to the success of our efforts.

Most of my conversations about cross-curricular connections occur when I run into classroom teachers as I am racing down the hallway, artwork shoved under my arm and pushpins in the corner of my mouth.

## Professional Development for Art Educators

Many articles highlight art educators experiencing feelings of isolation in their professional lives (Cohen-Evron, 2002; Hord, 2009; Sabol, 2006). At the elementary school level, there is often only one art teacher who teaches every child at the school. In many cases, the art room is physically removed from the academic classes, setting up yet another barrier to communication and collaboration. In Vermont, where I live, it is also common for art teachers to travel to three or four different schools a week, transporting art materials and lesson plans in cars and on carts, with no quality time to spend with classroom teachers or other art-teaching peers. It makes sense for teachers to be grouped for professional learning by the subject or grade levels that they teach, but often that is not an available option for art teachers.

During a professional learning community meeting, should the art teacher pull a chair up to the table where colleagues are discussing 5th- and 6th-grade science curriculum, or perhaps sit in on a dialogue about plans for reinforcing positive behavior in the lower grades? Art educators can feel pulled in a million different directions as they try to meet the needs of all their students, and their role in the organizational structure for professional learning can be just as frustrating (Lind, 2007).

Last year, my school district held three in-service days specifically designed for the professional development of art educators. At each of these sessions, I met with a small group of peers with the task assigned to us by our superintendent: placing the units of study that we had developed individually into a shared curriculum map. We spent the day staring at our laptop screens and working to fit our particular lesson plans into spreadsheets. At the end of the day, our administrative task had been performed and the boxes were filled in, but instead of feeling invigorated from a day in the company of other art teachers, I felt spent and frustrated. The projects that came to life in the hands of our students, now reduced to objectives and performance outcomes, had also been drained of their color and excitement. Researchers on professional

learning communities (Clark, 2001; Snow-Gerono, 2005) have reported that individuals benefit when there are opportunities for teacher inquiry and open dialogue. On that day of scheduled and scripted professional development, the only inquiry and dialogue that occurred related to accessing the shared document and formatting text within the spreadsheet. On our lunch break, we talked about our desire to get together sometime at each other's studios to play with materials and learn new techniques. Yet at this year's district meeting, we were told by our superintendent that due to budget issues, art teachers would not be meeting at all on scheduled in-service days.

Responding to a scarcity of research about professional development specifically for art educators, Robert Sabol (2006), with the support of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), conducted an extensive study distributing a detailed questionnaire to 3,265 art educators from across the country. His purpose was to identify the factors affecting the implementation of beneficial models of continuing education for art teachers. After examining the findings, he concluded that teachers will ultimately need to be proactive in their own professional growth by advocating for, designing, and participating in activities that are meaningful to them. What do teachers want out of their professional development experiences? According to the survey, they want to "improve their teaching, help students learn better, keep informed about the field, develop skills, and challenge themselves" (p. 6). How could I facilitate meetings that would allow all those things to happen?

## Beginnings

Working part-time allows me to volunteer as a docent at the contemporary art museum in my local community, and I have been impressed by the rich connections that children make between themselves and the artwork on display. By choosing to meet at the museum and to focus on the exhibits as catalysts for our unit discussion, we would be following the lead of educators such as Olivia Gude (2004) and those behind the Art21 (n.d.) initiatives, exposing ourselves to new contemporary artists whose work would "provoke curiosity and encourage dialogue about the world and the issues that affect student lives" (para. 4). The resulting conversations and hands-on responses to the art would make our discoveries more relevant to our students.

The first two teachers I approached about participating, William and Ellen, were already acquaintances; the third, Suzanne, had been a student teacher in Ellen's classroom the previous year. All of us teach elementary-aged students at schools in southern Vermont and all were enthusiastic about getting together for a collaborative project. During individual interviews after our first two meetings, I asked them why they had agreed to participate in the group.

**"I thought maybe some good ideas would come out of it, and it would be nice to know what other people were doing." —William<sup>2</sup>**

**"Well, I've always been eager to help people who are trying to get things done, to continue their professional development. I guess I'm empathetic. That was one reason, and then also to hang out with other elementary art teacher, because I never get time to do that." —Suzanne**

These comments fueled our plan to meet as likeminded teachers by touring our local museum and then gathering at my house to discuss our impressions, brainstorm possible curricular connections, and respond to what we had seen with an open-ended, hands-on activity.

## Our First Meeting

On the first day of our collaboration, I stood outside the museum, excited about the possibilities of our encounters. I handed out sketchbooks for recording ideas and outlined the plan for our next few meetings, emphasizing that our goal would be the development of a shared unit of study.

Our local museum, located in the center of town, has rotating exhibits of contemporary art. When we visited, there were six exhibits on display. We focused on Wolf Kahn's pastel landscapes and the work of two fiber artists, Salley Mavor and Karen Kamenetzky. We toured the museum, making notes, and then returned to my house for some light refreshments and conversation. Before discussing what we had seen at the museum, I invited each teacher to share something that he or she found useful or particularly successful in the classroom. William showed the group how to construct large articulated figures for the upcoming Day of the Dead observation by combining precut rectangles, a lesson he adapted from Nancy Beal's *The Art of Teaching Art to Children: In School and at Home* (2001). I passed out fliers (from the state art teachers'

conference) outlining plans for the Youth Art Month exhibition at the state house. Ellen pulled up a video on [GourmetPaperMache.com](http://GourmetPaperMache.com) that her students had really enjoyed.

After our sharing time, we shifted to the dining room table, each of us reaching for a particular material from the abundant array. I had chosen an assortment of media related to the work we had seen; this allowed us a chance to turn what we had viewed and discussed into something more tangible. As we continued our initial investigations using the materials, ideas for lessons connected to the exhibits began to emerge.

**"Those quilted fabric pieces we saw reminded me of the cells that the kids are looking at under the microscope in science. We could do a project about biology!" —Ellen**

Ellen took out a book she bought at the museum that showed how artist Salley Mavor makes the characters in her sewn story panels. I ran down to the basement to bring up some silk flowers that we could use to make the clothes for little fairy figures, like Mavor does. A few minutes later, there was a cast of wild-haired characters assembled on the table. Before we knew it, our time was up, and we agreed to meet again at the museum the next month, where we would design a unit of study to teach to our students.

## Second Meeting at the Museum

One month later, our cohort was back at the museum, assembled in one of the smaller exhibition rooms, viewing colorful pastel landscapes of the Vermont countryside. Each of our schools places a strong emphasis on place-based education, and Wolf Kahn's work



ABOVE and Page 14: Ready to PLAY! Available art materials related to work viewed at the museum.



Conversation area in the Wolf Kahn exhibition.

seemed like a perfect starting point for us to begin our discussion on a common unit of study. We agreed to develop a series of lessons for our 5th-grade students. While investigating the works on display, we exchanged our ideas regarding possible materials to use and themes to emphasize.

**"I'm wondering about using chalk; I mean, it seems like he does these layers of color."** —William

**"This seems like it would be more about seeing, about simplifying."** —Ellen

**"I did [a project about] Wolf Kahn two or three years ago, and we went outside and the kids really had fun with it. Everyone had their clipboards and their own baggies of pastels, and they each had a special place to be. They were really a hard group, and this was a fun project for them. It was all about the prep for them, picking out all the colors that they thought they might like."** —Suzanne

After brainstorming, we decided on a unit of study that would encourage students to create landscapes inspired by Wolf Kahn's use of expressive colors and simplified forms. We would design a series of lessons addressing the same topic but tailored to our own group of students.

Shirley Hord has written extensively about professional development and, along with Victoria Boyd (1994), argues for a cooperative approach to teaching. Hord details the core concepts behind successful professional development opportunities: establishing shared leadership, emphasizing collective creativity, and promoting shared values and vision under supportive conditions (Hord, 2009). Cooperative teaching, when built around a foundation of collegiality and inquiry, strengthens the teacher's practice with a direct result of more engaging and meaningful lessons for students (Gates, 2010; Snow-Gerono, 2005). Within just two meetings, our group had developed a mutual trust and respect that allowed for thoughtful and insightful discussions, with all teachers listening and contributing equally. Our collaboration led not only to enriched peer interaction, but also to engaging classroom applications and positive student responses.

### Impact of Professional Learning in the Art Room

Working intently, Meghan<sup>3</sup>, one of my 5th-grade students, bent over her paper, blending the pastels with her fingertips. A carpet of red and yellow leaves met the blue sky of the landscape she had created.

Teachers will ultimately need to be proactive in their own professional growth by advocating for, designing, and participating in activities that are meaningful to them. What do teachers want out of their professional development experiences?



Her forearm and cheek showed a history of the other colors she used to build up layers: blue, green, smudges of gold. I asked my students to write down a list of emotions and to imagine what colors and shapes might be paired with a particular feeling. We then looked at some photographs of landscapes and talked about horizontal and vertical planes, light sources, and textures. To encourage the students to make connections between the artwork and their own lives (Gude, 2004; Sandell, 2012), I asked them to close their eyes before they began sketching and to imagine themselves in the middle of a field during a specific season. What did the air feel like? Where was the sun? Were leaves rustling on the trees? The assignment was to draw from personal experience using chalk to create a landscape that evoked a particular emotion.

A week later, I visited Ellen at her school to see what her students had done. Ellen's students were illustrating stories using the same techniques that we had seen in Salley Mavor's work at the museum, including figures like the ones we had made at my house. I made a plan to interview each of the participants so I could compare the work that resulted and find out if any other aspects of our collaboration affected student

achievement or the teachers' professional practices. We scheduled our meeting during her lunch break, but there were a handful of students moving about the room, collecting materials and putting finishing touches on fabric environments. On one square of felt, a tiny Harry Potter made from fabric and beads stood in front of a massive door, pointing his wand toward a spiraling shape. On another, Rapunzel—with her long, golden braid—leaned out of a tower window.

With the classroom cleared of students, Ellen told me about the Wolf Kahn project:

**It was actually helpful when I told the kids that they were doing this project in conjunction with other art teachers and that we were going to share our work. They thought that was really cool, like they'd be part of a bigger group.**

The students were echoing the same feeling of empowerment that teachers express when working toward a common goal in a learner-directed, collaborative environment (Gates, 2010; Lind, 2007).

Ellen's students created a variety of scribble papers—layers and layers of intersecting lines and colors on different shades of paper. Then they went outside to lightly sketch from observation the trees and fields that surround

their school in this scenic part of the Green Mountains. The following class, they ripped up their scribble papers to form a collage with the shapes and contours that they had drawn in their landscapes. Her students' work was very different from mine, but equally impressive.

The student work in the other teachers' classrooms was also compelling. All four teachers reported that the unit they created as part of our collaboration was particularly successful. In our discussions at the museum, we used the input and support of our cohort to adapt the lessons and make them more meaningful for our classes. According to Hazelroth and Moore (1998), "effective collaborations are characterized by shared needs and interests, a commitment of time, and energetic individuals who manifest the collaborative spirit, ongoing communication and a willingness to share resources" (p. 213).

Suzanne later stated that it was helpful "knowing that one time that we were all doing the same project together." She explained, "I don't know what it did, but it gave kind of a sympathetic cushion knowing that someone else out there is going through the same things, that maybe we were all experiencing the same struggles or having the same successes." The influence of our



FROM LEFT:  
Student's Harry Potter  
illustration from Ellen's  
storybook assignment.

Two examples of  
student work from  
Linda's and Ellen's  
assignments based on  
the work of Wolf Kahn.

collaboration went beyond just that unit. Three out of four teachers designed lesson plans around the sewn story figures of Salley Mavor, asking students to make connections to literature by crafting narrative, embroidered pieces. Other lessons grew out of conversations and sharing that occurred when we met at my home.

### Conclusions

The enthusiasm and openness of each teacher, an engaging collection of contemporary art, and the opportunity for hands-on, creative exploration all added to the success of the Sunday afternoon meetings. This is not surprising; studies and surveys have shown that art educators crave opportunities to make art (Brewer, 1999; Sabol, 2006). Most art educators are artists as well as teachers, and manipulating materials is how we think, how we express ourselves, how we connect with others. Having our conversations occur in a comfortable environment made the meetings more intimate. Researchers have stated, "teacher conversation groups constitute a low-cost, sustainable, satisfying, and potentially transformative form of teacher professional development" (Clark, 2001, p. 172). After only two meetings, through the combination of exposure to art exhibits, access

to materials for "constructive play," collegial sharing of resources, and time dedicated to collaborative planning, each teacher gained more than a handful of ideas for lessons, most of which connected to the curriculum beyond the arts. We had formed a neighborhood, borrowing books and ideas from one another. Our formal experiment lasted only 3 months, but within that short time we met all five of the criteria that teachers had asked for in the NAEA study. As Sabol (2006) recommended, we took action and initiated our own model for professional development by creating a small, informal professional learning community that fed our needs as artist and teachers, collaborating with the goal of educating ourselves so that we could better serve our students.

---

*Linda Whelihan is an artist/educator in Brattleboro, Vermont. E-mail: l.whelihan@comcast.net. Website: lindawhelihan.com*

After only two meetings... each teacher gained more than a handful of ideas for lessons, most of which connected to the curriculum beyond the arts.

## REFERENCES

- Art21. (n.d.). The integration of contemporary art. Retrieved from [www.art21.org/teach/on-contemporary-art/contemporary-approaches-to-teaching](http://www.art21.org/teach/on-contemporary-art/contemporary-approaches-to-teaching)
- Boyd, V., & Hord, S. M. (1994, April). *Principals and the new paradigm: Schools as learning communities*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED373428.pdf>
- Brewer, T. (1999). Art teacher profile and preference. *Studies in Art Education*, 4(1), 61-70.
- Clark, C. M. (2001). *Talking shop: authentic conversation and teacher learning*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Cohen-Evron, N. (2002). Why do good art teachers find it hard to stay in the public school system? *Studies in Art Education*, 44(1), 79-94.
- Gates, L. (2010). Professional development through collaborative inquiry for an art education archipelago. *Studies in Art Education*, 52(1), 6-17.
- Gude, O. (2004). Postmodern principles: In search of a 21st century art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 57(1), 6-14.
- Hazelroth, S., & Moore, J. (1998). Spinning the web: Creating a structure of collaboration between schools and museums. *Art Education*, 51(2), 20-24.
- Hord, S. (2009). A synthesis of research on organizational collaboration. *Educational Leadership*, 43(5), 22-26.
- Leonard, L., & Leonard, P. (2003). The continuing trouble with collaboration: Teachers talk. *Current Issues in Education*, 6(15). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/volume6/number15>
- Lind, V. R. (2007). High quality professional development: An investigation of the supports for and barriers to professional development in arts education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 8(2), 1-18.
- Sandell, R. (2012). *What excellent visual arts teaching looks like: Balanced, interdisciplinary and meaningful* [white paper]. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association. Retrieved from [www.arteducators.org/advocacy/NAEA\\_WhitePapers\\_3.pdf](http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/NAEA_WhitePapers_3.pdf)
- Sabol, F. R. (2006). *Professional development in art education: A study of needs, issues, and concerns of art educators*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Snow-Gerono, J. (2005). Professional development in a culture of inquiry: PDS teachers identify the benefits of professional learning communities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 241-256.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Source: [www.museumofplay.org/education/education-and-play-resources/play-quotes](http://www.museumofplay.org/education/education-and-play-resources/play-quotes)
- 2 All personal communication, observations, reflections, and interviews are from 2011 and 2012. 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).
- 3 The student's name is a pseudonym.

## AUTHOR NOTES

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).

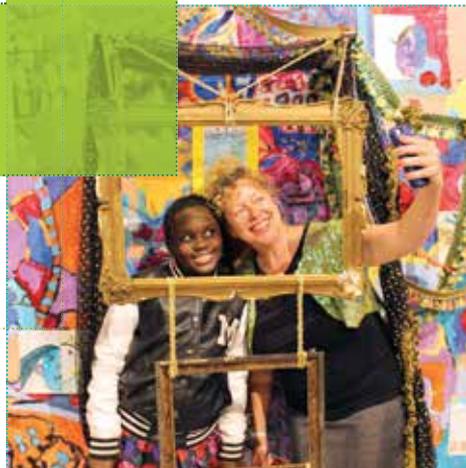
Special thanks to the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in Brattleboro, Vermont for exhibiting such inspirational works of art.

## Advance your practice in Arts Education

Vermont College of Fine Arts now offers a low-residency **Master of Arts in Art & Design Education**, a convenient and highly affordable program created especially for working teachers.

*master of arts in art & design education*

*Our students share a deep desire to reflect on and renew their teaching practice, a belief in the transformative power of the arts, and the need for flexibility to stay in their home environment while they progress academically and professionally.*



[vcfa.edu](http://vcfa.edu)