

Product and Process- an Eighth Grade Journey in Reflection

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The close of the school year is such a stressful time for Art teachers. Returning student work, packing up the art room and trying to find homes for all the mini yogurt containers and empty shoe boxes that seemed indispensable throughout the school year takes days, weeks even. I cram quite a bit of stuff in my tiny little space, thanks to all of my thoughtful coworkers and the generous donations to our organization. However, packing up an Art room pales in comparison to the burden we bear to “show off” at the close of the school year. From April on, we Art teachers are consumed by wrapping up those final projects, designing sets for school musicals and plays and that dreaded end of the year Art show. This is where we have the opportunity to really advocate for what we do and why. All those beautiful Pinterest perfect projects neatly mounted with didactics, exemplars and standards so parents and administrators come away with a sense of just how fabulous your program is. Who’s heart melts witnessing proud students leading the people they live with to that work that turned out just so. Now, it’s no secret that I am not a fan of “Pinterest” art. Nothing personal, Pinterest- I often come to you first for ideas, however all those lovely boards of elementary “Anansi the Spiders” and Adinkra symbols made with the same media held to a standard of “sameness,” under the guise of multiculturalism sticks in my craw. This conundrum is often discussed with my students in the Art and Design Education Department at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. However, here I am (for reasons I shall expand on later in this article) at my wit’s end because I have half an Art exhibition installed and a very important project that hasn’t turned out close to anything I had envisioned.

If we have learned anything from the covid pandemic it is that navigating students to produce a highly specific product is unattainable, (and with regards to the Pinterest reference) appropriate, pointless and irrelevant for/to our learners. I must remind myself that students now, more than ever, need outlets to process what is going on in the world around them. Most elementary students have lost at least a solid year of not only physical and technical development, but have struggled with meeting social and emotional needs and will struggle, I believe, for years to come with forming appropriate, meaningful social relationships. We must shift to process, not product.

Not to worry, Reader, this article will not focus on the pandemic and post-covid fallout, but simply focus on the need to be cognizant of how Arts pedagogy and philosophy is in a reactionary shift as we struggle, even still, to navigate projects and curriculum that is rigorous, relevant and equitable, and that sometimes don’t always go as planned.

In the spring of 2022, I was honored to be named a Larry Maronne Grant recipient. Bestowed by the Special Needs in Art Education special interest group of the National Art Education Association, the Larry Marone Grant offers small stipend grants to fund projects, equipment, and supplies to educators working in the field of special education in art.

In addition to being a lecturer at the University of the Arts, I am the K-12 Art teacher at Martin Luther School at Gemma Services in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania. Martin Luther School (MLS) is a small approved private school that serves the needs of students with severe emotional and behavioral challenges. Gemma Services provides residential treatment for children, most of whom have experienced trauma and a portion of the students I teach live on campus in residential treatment. This grant was written for my students at Martin Luther School.

Having watched my eighth grade students graduate virtually in 2020, and then after a full virtual year of instruction 2020-2021, to then only gather to graduate in 2021, I knew there was a need for my students to have the opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate their personal growth and accomplishments achieved during their career at MLS through project-based learning. Why such a focus on celebrating students 'graduating' eighth grade, you may ask? They are simply completing eighth grade, right?! However, for many of my students at MLS, this may possibly be the only graduation they may see; so dear Reader, this *is* a big deal.

As our (at the time) new school director gathered staff for professional development at the beginning of the 2019 school year, she spoke to us about the changing vision and mission of our school. Our school was shifting from supporting our special populations students through a PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) system to a school that uses restorative practices, "promot[ing] healthy relationships and positive discipline inside and outside of school. A restorative approach to conflict focus[ing] on solving problems and repairing harm."¹ I was inspired by how she paralleled the rules of improv to restorative practice. The rules of improv can be explained and interpreted in many ways, however they are best defined in this instance through the lens of service. Thus, the first rule of improv is to "Say yes." The second rule of improv is to "Say yes, and." The third rule of improv is to make statements and the fourth rule is that there are no mistakes.² My director explained how these rules could then be adapted and scaffolded to conduct discussion in restorative circles. That was it! Saying "yes and," not only acknowledges and reinstates, but builds and facilitates conversation driven to heal. So, what if this rule of improv became a metaphor for building? What if I were to take the idea of "say yes, and" and apply it directly to my eighth grade students' experiences? "Yes, I'm wearing an ankle bracelet, and I'm going to be a lawyer." "Yes, I am a victim of sexual abuse, and my trauma does not define me." I have learned that as someone who serves children impacted by trauma and abuse, it is essential to facilitate their ability to picture themselves in the future.³ As stakeholders in the success of our students at MLS, we strive to foster the joy and hope needed for our students to envision an attainable future as young adults.

Soon, I began to put my proposal together. For Mental Health Awareness Month and National Foster Care Month this May, students were going to "Say Yes, And." This unit would ask students to recognize that while they face difficult challenges, they possess talents and the strength of character to grow and to achieve greatness. Through the completion of this project, students were going to become more aware of their own value and capability to love, be loved and to forgive. For this project, our students would choose a quilting square on which to "Say yes, and." Students would then embellish their squares with embroidery floss, machine stitching,

fabric markers, buttons, sequins, pom poms, permanent markers and acrylic paint and printing ink. Students were going to not only learn about contemporary and art historical quiltmakers, but would also learn about American poets and poetry writing, as I planned to work cross-curricularly with our eighth grade ELA teacher. Students were going to reflect and write why and how they “Say yes, and.” Students would experiment with spoken word, rap and poetry writing, as I planned to work cross-curricularly also with our Music teacher. The fabric squares would be joined into one large quilt to be displayed in the school at their graduation ceremony and be presented to our school director as the eighth grade class gift. I couldn’t wait to set this project in motion.

The spring of this year, I met with our school’s curriculum director and with our eighth grade ELA teacher. We determined a timeline and brainstormed ideas for how to introduce the writing component to students. By the end of April, I was pushing into ELA classes. Students were used to beginning each English class with five minutes of silent writing. This kind of warm up seemed a perfect way to introduce ekphrastic response to the quilts students would be examining. Ekphrasis can be traced back to Ancient Greece as an exercise in rhetoric (Welsh, 2007). Essentially, it is a way to use words to vividly describe something. Today, ekphrasis has come to be known as poetry about a work of art (Hovanek, 2016). Students examined *Each of These Leaves*, by quiltmaker Michael James. As they had just learned how to write acrostic poems, they were given five minutes to write an acrostic poem about the work, what they noticed, wondered or how they felt when looking at the work. Next, they took turns sharing their poems. Then, they created drawings inspired by their poems.

The next time we met, we looked at Faith Ringgold’s *Quilting Bee at Arles*. We talked about all of the things we noticed. As a group, we made a list of words that came to mind when examining the work. Sunflowers, newspapers, blackness and picnic were some of the words students came up with. Next, we took all of the words from the word bank and put them together as a class to describe Ringgold’s work in a poem. After that, students were again invited to create a drawing inspired by the poem using reverse ekphrasis. The project was coming along.

Supplies I had ordered arrived, and I excitedly sorted through them. I pictured all of these lovely personalized quilting squares embellished with stitching, paint, markers and all of these fun textural sundries. That week, my supervisor asked me to accompany her on a visit to our sister campus which we were cleaning out in preparation for the sale of the property; and before many of the items on the campus were donated, she wanted to be sure I hadn’t overlooked anything I may want to have in my art room. Sure enough, hidden in a closet I discovered two practically new sewing machines. Now that a new sewing machine was no longer on my list, I had extra funds freed up. Perhaps I could have a spoken word artist come and speak to my older students.

It was time to begin rehearsing the eighth grade’s chosen song for their graduation performance. The music teacher and I began working together every other week, working on either their musical performance for the graduation or working on their poetry and quilt project. We knew that gathering the entire class together would invite chaos and possible off-task

behaviors, so it was highly important for each of us to be available to support the other and our students.



Fan girling with Enoch the Poet

I secured a guest speaker for our spoken word assembly. Enoch the Poet, founder and executive publisher of Black Minds Publishing, award-winning published spoken word artist and trauma-informed educator, he was the perfect person to bring in to share his work and experience with my students.

In preparation for our assembly, I brought the entire eighth grade together in my tiny art room, sending some students out to carry extra chairs back from the music room. I took a deep breath. The room was packed, with some students even sitting on counters. Even though I don't see all of the eighth grade for Art classes (as they choose

between taking Art or Music), they know from years before that each class with me begins with a warm up. The question I asked was, "What do you do to help you cope?" Openly and honestly, students took turns sharing their varied skills in handling stress, conflict and sorrow. We then reviewed Ringgold and James' work, discussing how they used their art as a coping tool. Some students liked to use writing. I asked if students were familiar with spoken word poetry. Some had a thin grasp of the genre. I told them we were going to learn about it today. I next introduced Philadelphia "ghetto" potter Roberto Lugo, who in an interview discussed his work and shared a spoken word poem. The room was so quiet, you'd hardly believe there were 40 plus people inside. We compared Lugo's poetry to rap and discussed the similarities and differences. Next, I told the students that we were going to have a special guest speaker who was going to perform their poetry and talk to us about being an artist and writing spoken word poetry. I shared a video of Enoch the poet talking about his journey as an artist and sharing a poem. Students could hardly believe this artist was going to visit us. Next, it was time to have students try this kind of writing for themselves. They took paper and pencils and began brainstorming. I had large buckets labeled Nouns, Verbs and Adjectives for students who were stuck. I walked through the crowded room, "Care for a noun?" "Verb, anyone?" "Anybody stuck? Get your adjectives here!" I have to admit that while yes, I do have very high expectations for my students, I was surprised

to see how quickly they got to work and how focused they were on the task. With 15 minutes left, I asked who was ready to share, fully anticipating the dreaded quiet room with no raised hands. My students proved me wrong, eager to share their work even in its rough stages, students (and their teachers) took turns sharing their work. My heart was full. I was so proud. The project was moving along perfectly.

Our assembly was, as I had hoped, inspirational. Students were rapt. After Enoch's performance, the seventh and ninth grade students exited, leaving the eighth grade to ask thoughtful questions like, "How do you not let your trauma define you?" and "What was hardest about sharing your poetry?" Lingered students were allowed to stay back and ask more questions and share their poems with the artist. "I definitely need to have a poetry slam for these kids," I thought.

I spent so much of this project devoted to poetry and reflection, that it was high time for students to begin working on their quilting squares. As we were going through the supplies and the plan for how our students would begin, my intern, Maya, suggested color copying the quilting squares so students could plan before using the fabric. We gathered everyone in the cafeteria so there was plenty of room to work. I reviewed the artists we had studied and talked about narrative in artmaking. I then read Faith Ringgold's "Tar Beach" to the students. After reading the book, we discussed different ways that stories can be told in imagery. Students chose their paper fabric squares and began their designs. I couldn't wait for them to proceed to their fabric versions.



In-progress quilting squares

In a perfect world, I would have been seeing the entire eighth grade for Art classes. During that time, I would have been able to scaffold working with fabric. We would have had sewing boot camps, where they could learn to tie and whip stitch, embroider and machine sew. But I was not seeing all of the students, and because of the pandemic had not seen some of them for years.

It was time to begin working with the fabric. Undaunted, I cut a large piece of cardboard and punctured several 3 inch holes within it. A large piece of crochet yarn was then tied to a ruler so that I could demonstrate to the group how to sew. I had my two sewing machines set up at the ready at two tables (in the event that in a gametime decision, I decided to allow my students to use them). The fabric quilting squares were taped with a border, so students were reminded to leave an edge in order to sew them together. We went over the available

[illegible]

The next day was to be our poetry slam. I had recorded a loom video days before for the

The event went off beautifully. Students were eager. They were confident. Every poem read was met with wild applause. Looking through the crowd that attended, I picked out the beaming reading specialists who had been working so diligently with some of these students to become better readers. There were proud homeroom teachers and classroom assistants, whooping administrators and younger students. Students read poems about growth, gender identity, strength and resilience. I began to wonder, was this what the project was really about?

My reading has improved see
cause im tuff

Athletic

see cause im tuff

Understanding

see cause im tuff

Restless

see cause im tuff

I do this and thats

see cause im tuff

Cameras off on virtual

see cause im tuff

Edgy

see cause im tuff

A spoken word poem from our poetry slam

The next day, the music teacher, eighth grade homeroom teachers, counselors and I organized a graduation run through in the gymnasium, where the graduation ceremony would be held. We planned for a full day the following Tuesday of run throughs and rehearsals. During that time the next week, I would have tables set up in the back of the gym, pulling students to work on the sewing machines and finish their quilting squares. I would piece the quilt together Tuesday afternoon and it would be ready for graduation the next day. It was all falling into place. I was so relieved to have that whole day with the students. I continued to hang the student work that I had been mounting for the last couple of weeks, knowing I would have the entire day of Monday to complete the exhibition.

It turns out that I would never hang the rest of the exhibition. I would not have that day to work one on one with the students. I wouldn't even see the eighth grade students

graduate (some of whom I have known since kindergarten) and I wouldn't finish the quilt on time. I had hoped that when I woke early that next Saturday morning, I was only sick from exhaustion, but as luck would have it, wouldn't you guess- it was covid. After a few days of deep self sympathy, I was able to gain some clarity over the whole situation, and quite honestly, reflect upon the journey I took with my eighth grade students. Had I fallen into that "Pinterest" trap? Was this project really about the picture perfect product (the quilt), or was it about the process after all? I realized that in my self pity, I had lost sight of what was truly important and what has grown to become part of my own teaching philosophy. As my students moved through this project, I witnessed them solve problems, take risks, advocate, provide feedback and support each other. My eighth graders stepped out of their comfort zone and found ways of expressing themselves that they hadn't tried before and possibly wouldn't have tried had it not been for this project. Students were thrust into new social dynamics and situations that could have been chaotic, yet they remained creative, productive and did the one thing they were asked to do, which was to try and they truly shone at it.

This project has helped me stay cognizant of the need to remain grounded in what is fundamentally important to student learning and developmental growth. I propose that as we move forward as Arts educators, particularly in our post-pandemic world, we re-prioritize our focus. Let us not itemize the product over the process. Let's loosen our control and personal bias over the media and the means to what we believe to be a desired end. Let us embrace

when things don't go as planned and allow our students the space they need to process experiences and formulate their own ideas, so that they are better equipped to make sense of the world and their place within it.

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