

By going beyond the classroom and getting involved in community-based projects, students become connected to the outside world and are offered opportunities to change the public's attitude toward art.

# Three Initiatives for Community-Based Art Education Practices



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Figure 1. Preservice art teachers brainstorm mural ideas.

**A**ccording to Lawton (2010), art educators should be concerned with teaching their students to make critical connections between the classroom and the outside world. One effective way to make these critical connections is to provide students with the opportunity to engage in community-based art endeavors (Bolin, 2000; Gude, 2007). In this article, three university art educators discuss engaging preservice art teachers in community arts events. The first author reviews a collaborative mural project as a meaning-making process that fostered a constructive partnership between the university and the local public school and promoted preservice art teachers' positive attitudes toward community service-learning art projects. The second author examines the Pecan Festival as a community service-learning activity for preservice art teachers. She emphasizes the importance of studying the local community and environment while connecting the art education course curriculum to a community art event. The third author reflects on the significant benefits preservice art teachers achieved through community involvement and outreach with the Youth Art Festival.



Figure 2. Rebecca, a preservice art teacher, illustrates detail qualities of kid-friendly designs and cheerful images including trees, animals, and imaginative creatures. Reedy Fork Elementary, Greensboro, NC.

The purpose of this study was to share a review of current community art education programs and correlated curricula and then to open pragmatic dialogues relevant to community art initiatives among art educators. The article concludes with a call for action. According to Ulbricht (2005), art educators should take a careful look at the definitions, rationales, and goals of community-based art education before implementing new programs of their own. During this collaborative journey, we focused on four guiding questions: (1) In what ways do community arts serve preservice art teachers? (2) In what ways do preservice art teachers prepare for the community service projects? (3) What kinds of benefits can preservice art teachers achieve through community involvement and outreach? (4) In what ways do art educators connect the community projects to the regular curricula, which are the art teacher education courses in higher education? By exploring these questions through community service projects, art

educators can envision meaningful projects and programs that are enriching and educational for their students as well as for their communities. Although community-based art education has been a topic of discussion within the discourse of art education (Congdon, Blandy, & Bolin, 2001; Gude, 1989; London, 1994), this article will take a second look at various forms of community-based art education and propose ideas for future community-based art curriculum initiatives.

### Community Mural Project as Meaning Making

As contemporary artists often search for relevant meanings through their artmaking practices, art educators and their students can explore an artmaking experience as a meaning-making process (Walker, 2001). Aligned with this approach, I continue to seek practical methods from real-world experience to expand my preservice art teachers' learning experiences. Moreover, I work to foster preservice art teachers' professional interests in art and education and to promote their positive attitudes toward community-based art education practices (Bolin, 2000; Lawton, 2010). In September 2010, I received an e-mail from a media specialist at Reedy Fork Elementary in Greensboro, North Carolina. The media specialist wanted a mural for her school library. As soon as my preservice art teachers at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) decided to take on the project, we visited the elementary school to take photos and measurements of the reading nook where the mural would be sited. The fostering of a productive partnership with a local public school is vital in securing public school endorsement for art education and for enhancing its respect in the community (Chung & Ortiz, 2011); therefore, we collaborated with staff from the Reedy Fork Elementary to discuss anticipated themes, images, and art materials suitable for the eco-friendly school building (Figure 1). In developing the mural design, we chose bright colors for cheerful images including realistic and imaginative animals and comical aliens reading and smiling (Figure 2). Our intention was to create an environment



that could transport the elementary students to another world, the same way reading can transport them into the lives and times of the characters they come to love through books (Soldat, Sinclair, & Mark, 1997).

Leadership crucial to the mural project's success occurred on multiple levels and in many ways. Kara, a preservice art teacher, reflected,

The leadership sustained and created during this process is what made the completion of the mural project possible. Cooperating together with university students, mentors and community members allows for great opportunities. I was able to gain resources, support and the chance to volunteer and show our artwork in the community, and I learned the importance of communication and collaboration. (reflection paper, November 10, 2010)

As a faculty advisor, I provided guiding leadership and communication between the public school and the university. With a group that included preservice teachers without transportation, someone had to provide leadership regarding logistical concerns. Art education student leaders were able to integrate new arrivals wherever they could be most effectively used (Figure 3).

As Carroll (2006) stated, art educators' own expertise in art plays a vital role in nurturing students' artistic development. Echoing this view, Chuck, an art education student leader, articulated his insight in relation to this project as an educational experience:

As a teacher, our role will vary with each student just as there was need for different leaders in the completing of the mural. Each day presents new scenarios that as a leader in our classroom we must have the flexibility and the creativity to adapt to so that we can best reach our students. (reflection paper, November 3, 2010)

Sullivan (2005) argued that art practice provides opportunities for understanding, constructing, and communicating new knowledge. The artmaking experiences in the mural project generated

transformative knowledge in communicating and constructing. The question often asked about this project is not so much "what happened?" but "what did the preservice art teachers take from their community involvement?" In one respect, the creation of the mural provided these preservice art teachers a crucial opportunity to reflect on the meaning making, self-expression, and acts of empathy that may have all occurred, but what was really emphasized was the development of self-identity (i.e., artist-teacher). Given the wealth of creative and meaningful art experiences during the mural project, the preservice art teachers had the opportunity to develop professional characteristics. Becky, a preservice art teacher, attests to this outcome:

Most of all, I had fun creating art in a public space especially for children and developed positive insights in the art making process as meaning-making as a future art teacher. My art making experience with the mural helped me define myself as an artist-teacher. (reflection paper, November 10, 2010)

Community-based art education practice emphasizes "socially relevant purposes of postmodern art while expanding the classroom beyond the borders and walls of the school" (Innella, 2010, p. 51), and the participants' thoughtful reflections are the essential practice of community service learning (Taylor, 2002). The making of this mural involved extensive communication and team play, and the preservice art teachers engaged dynamically in every step of the process (Figure 4). They also engaged in critical reflections on the ways their experience fostered art education careers and generated future volunteer opportunities in this locale by writing weekly reflections. Additionally, based on the field reflection assignments, four preservice art teachers collaboratively studied the outcomes of the mural project. Their self-exploratory journeys in the meaning-making process were presented at state and national art education conferences. Ashley, one of the preservice art teacher/presenters, expressed her insights on this journey:

Through the collaborative study for the professional presentations, I learned that during our mural project, we experienced a desire to positively contribute to the sense of the art making process as self-exploration and learning ways to make connection between theories and practices in art education. (reflection paper, November 15, 2010)

## The Pecan Festival: Community Service-Learning

Ulbricht (2005) defined community-based art education as any program that promotes contextual learning about local art and culture. Such a definition is well illustrated in Florence, South Carolina, a small community where it is rare to find public outreach programs. The arts are underfunded; however, there are some historic building preservation foundations and other organizations that strive to bring art to the community. The Pecan Festival is a community-based event held each November, rapidly growing from 4,000 attendees in its 2004 inaugural year to over 50,000 in 2011 (Figure 5). It is certainly the most visible manifestation of the Florence Downtown Development Corporation's mission to renew its decaying downtown.



from left  
Figure 3. Preservice art teachers are working on the mural as they are assigned for particular sections for the day. Reedy Fork Elementary, Greensboro, NC.

Figure 4. The mural completed.

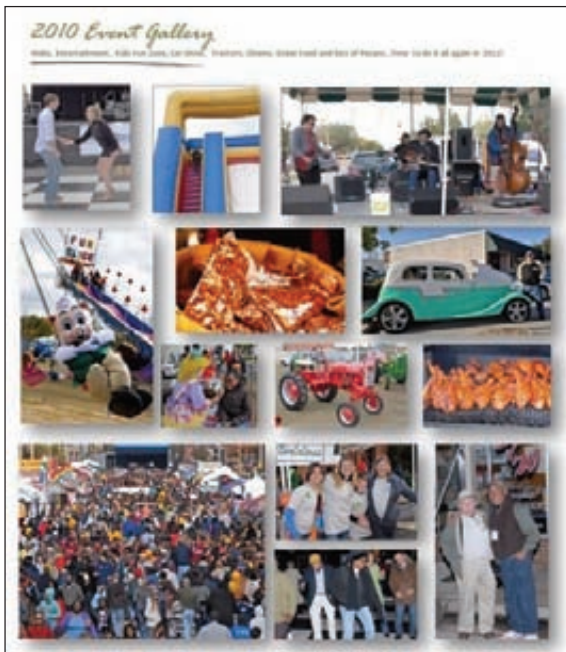


Figure 5. The 2010 Pecan Festival, Florence, SC.



Figure 6. Idea discussion with Ms. Simon, a director of the Pecan Festival.



Figure 7. Mask making with children at the Pecan Festival.



Figure 8. The Art Alley at the Pecan Festival.

When Teresa Simon, a director of the Pecan Festival, contacted me to coordinate Art Alley, a youth activity area, I thought it would be a great learning experience for the preservice teachers as they worked directly and collaboratively with members of the community and learned about the local culture and community. Studies (London, 1994; Ulbricht, 2002) demonstrate a community-based approach to instruction provides many advantages to both teacher and learner: it makes curriculum more relevant to student needs and real lives, accelerates personal and group development, expands learning and teaching content, improves advocacy initiatives, and makes connections to the greater community. However, when I began this project, I wondered how to combine the community project with a course. Russell and Hutzel (2005) and Buffington (2007) described significant characteristics of

community service-learning: being part of the regular curriculum, meeting a need, having a theoretical base, involving students in planning, allowing for reflection, involving reciprocal expertise among partners, and extending students' learning to include the experiences of others in the community. With these goals in mind, I assigned preservice teachers in the art methods class the task of coordinating the festival and offered discussion classes every Friday for 5 weeks. The Friday discussions were led entirely by the students.

During the first Friday discussion, the preservice teachers elected a project director—Spencer Selmon, a native Florence student—to be the liaison among the students and with the festival director. The preservice teachers then discussed what they would like to see in terms of activities at the festival. On

the second Friday, Spencer delivered a brief presentation to the students, introducing downtown Florence and the history of the Pecan Festival. The preservice teachers also shared their activity ideas. On the third Friday, Ms. Simon came to visit our class so everyone had an opportunity to voice opinions about the Art Alley (Figure 6). Ashley, a senior student, discussed the festival director's visit: "She gave very good insight on the type of materials and projects that would be appropriate for the event... It's important to consider [Florence community's] ideas because they know best the attitudes and interests of their fellow community members" (reflection paper, November 10, 2011). On the fourth Friday, the preservice teachers again discussed activities and agreed on mask making, Popsicle picture frames, torn cloth bracelets, festival logo designs, and a community drawing. On the fifth Friday, the class made visual prototypes for each activity and completed the supply lists for the festival.

The morning of November 5, 2011, was somewhat chaotic. Harriet, a junior, said, "The day of the festival taught me a lot... my biggest fear was that our ideas and activities would not mesh with the crowd and be kind of forgotten. But to my relief the children loved it" (class discussion, November 8, 2011). The most popular booth was the mask making (Figure 7), followed by the Popsicle picture frames and cloth bracelets. However, Ashley, a senior, complained, "Some necessary materials were missing and so improvisation was required for completing some tasks... Also many volunteers had to leave early, so we soon encountered [a] scarcity of volunteer support" (class discussion, November 8, 2011). In addition, it was an unusually windy day, so we were busy keeping our materials from the wind. There was also trouble finding the location of Art Alley (Figure 8). Jamie, a junior, pointed out the lack of promoting the area and said, "I felt like we should have been with the rest of the art tents on Art Alley, but instead we were hidden in the back with no advertising" (reflection paper, November 4, 2011).

Despite some drawbacks, the preservice teachers reflected that the Pecan Festival was still a great way to get involved with the community and to gain some much-needed experience teaching children how to create art. Sarah, a senior, reflected, "This is a great experience for me because it helps me get more acquainted in the community as well as valuable experience for activities and community projects that any art teacher has to participate in" (class discussion, November 8, 2011). Spencer, the project director, also reflected, "Throughout the process I learned how to properly plan and create with a team [and] also learned how art education could work outside of a classroom. Personally the biggest learning experience was obeying due dates" (reflection paper, November 7, 2011).

As educators, we need to begin to see our communities with new eyes, survey our surroundings, and make community-inspired curricula for preservice teachers (Villeneuve & Sheppard, 2009). We tend to overlook the places, people, and events of our immediate surroundings (Bolin, 2000). Instead, why not realize the full potential of our immediate surroundings? This kind of awareness is important because a local focus can give art educators a familiar basis to introduce and expand content (Villeneuve & Sheppard,

2009). Community-based art education provides numerous possibilities for the students to relate their art classroom experiences to their real-life experiences (Villeneuve & Sheppard, 2009). Such theories were corroborated by Tori, a junior:

It is important for all pre-service teachers to expose themselves to many possible teaching opportunities in their community... jumping into teaching without any prior guided experiences is not ideal. Pre-service teachers should experience many helpful services to better prepare themselves for their career. (reflection paper, November 10, 2011)

## Youth Arts Festival: Making a Critical Connection With the Real World

The Youth Arts Festival of East Carolina University (ECU) in Greenville, North Carolina, is an art-based service-learning tool that encourages preservice teachers to create a connection with the real world they will face in the future. As part of this festival I organized an art and literacy integration program called Stories and Art, which involved storytime sessions offered by storytellers and a follow-up puppet-making activity. I collaborated with three professional storytellers who actively work across the state, and with the art education and general education preservice teachers from my courses (Figure 9). When the storytellers were ready with their story selection, each of them sent me a list of story plots. The preservice teachers then studied all the stories the storytellers would use, designed puppets based on the chosen stories, and organized needed art materials. On the day of the arts festival, my preservice teachers volunteered to work with the storytellers and run the puppet-creating session (Figure 10).

According to Innella (2010), service learning takes place when service objectives are combined with learning objectives, and the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. In this context, the festival influenced both children from the community and preservice teachers at ECU, creating a reciprocal relationship. Compared to other parts of the state, Eastern North Carolina has significantly less access to arts and culture. Thus, this community art event was a great opportunity for youth from this area to explore the depth and richness of the arts. For the preservice teachers in my courses, the Youth Arts Festival served as an experiential learning opportunity to actually work with children through visual art outside the classroom (Figure 11). While collaborating with local storytellers and helping children with puppet making, the preservice teachers used critical thinking skills to re-examine real world situations (Innella, 2010).

I often tell my preservice teachers that effective art teaching necessitates sharing the teacher's own excitement about artmaking with learners, and I try to show them what this means in class. The activities for this festival provided a far more helpful instructional tool than textbooks in teaching this concept. In some sense, the preservice teachers were constructing new knowledge in a real-world setting by incorporating their experiences into their "prior knowledge" (Piaget as cited in Innella, 2010). Through this conceptual process, some preservice teachers developed specific



ECU Youth Arts Festival, Greenville, NC

from top

Figure 9. Storyteller Robin Kitson of Stories That Polish Your Heart! tells stories to children and college students.

Figure 10. A girl creates a lion puppet based on the story she just heard from a storyteller.

Figure 11. A preservice teacher helps children make a puppet at the Stories and Art session.

lesson ideas as active learners; they wanted to use a puppet project in their future classrooms. Importantly, the preservice teachers started to understand their responsibility to their community. Tiffany, a participating preservice teacher, reflected on this notion: “This experience was very beneficial because I knew I was contributing to something that would make children happy, and that is the most rewarding feeling” (reflection paper, April 12, 2011). This preservice teacher’s response resonates with Taylor’s (2002) idea that service learning can deepen students’ civic responsibility while offering a chance to develop experiential knowledge in their academic study by connecting theory to social practice.

Another important aspect of my preservice teachers’ involvement with the arts festival was their ability to go beyond stereotypical crafts in creating a puppet-making lesson. I emphasized creativity and innovation in preparing for the puppet activity from the very beginning. Each year, weeks prior to the event date, my preservice teachers make a new art lesson plan for the Stories and Art session as a group. In this creative process, I encourage the preservice teachers to design puppets that do not stay within the boundaries of typical crafts that can be seen in many general classrooms and community art events. Their objective is to encourage participating children to make meaning out of the art activity. To do so, the preservice teachers have to use their critical thinking skills to make a lesson plan for “unique” puppet making that can be an artistic tool to deliver the participating children’s personal voice. I find this process to be very important for both my preservice teachers and the children who participate in the puppet activity. Therefore, for the past 3 years we have used different kinds of puppets for each festival based on the kinds of activity ideas generated by my class.

The preservice teachers and storytellers presented mutual interest in each other’s roles in the project. The preservice teachers were impressed by the quality of storytelling and wanted to learn new skills from the storytellers, while the storytelling professionals seemed to be excited about talking with preservice teachers and



Figure 12. From preschoolers to middle school students, children at varied ages participated in the ECU Youth Arts Festival.

were willing to share tips about how to attract elementary students with stories. Rufer, Lake, Robinson, and Hicks (1998) suggested that art education needs effective advocacy to change public attitudes toward its value and to help the majority of citizens in a community understand that art education is an important part of their lives. In this regard, the ECU Youth Arts Festival provides an avenue not only for preservice teachers and faculty to engage in community involvement but also for community members to change their “public mind,” particularly in the context of a festive celebration of the arts (Figure 12).

## Reflections

The participants in these community-based art education practices, whether a sole volunteering activity or a service-learning course assignment, dynamically engaged in every step of the process. Although there was no immediate evidence of student learning and growth after participating in just one project, and although preservice teachers might not have identified other ways in which they could continue to engage in volunteering for the community through art, “the seeds of volunteerism may be planted for the future” (Innella, 2010, p. 51). Guidance and teamwork presented by the faculty and preservice teachers made these community projects successful, and collaboration of this type could “encourage school and community program transformation, promoting growth in the field and new learning opportunities for students” (Freedman, 2011, p. 41).

Successful art education programs will be the ones that are committed to their community because such involvement is a way to meet current K-12 students’ needs and to develop art teachers who are open to ever-changing teaching content (Gude, 2007; Rufer et al., 1998). These three initiatives demonstrated that when an art curriculum goes beyond an isolated classroom, it can create a vital connection between students and real-world situations, showing both possibilities and challenges. The participating preservice art teachers incorporated critical-thinking skills into their collaborative learning processes by re-examining their social responsibility through service learning and volunteering. While nurturing preservice teachers by enriching collaborative opportunities and expanding their understanding of public responsibility, art education programs can make progress in changing the public’s attitude toward visual art education<sup>1</sup> and offer the public opportunities to revisit the role of art education in everyday life.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> For instance, in 2012, the ECU Art Education program witnessed an increase in the number of parents who inquired about their afterschool art program after the Youth Arts Festival. Some parents gave faculty members feedback about their children’s favorite activities from the Youth Arts Festival and wanted to participate again in the future. In the Greenville downtown area, engagement with arts and cultural activities is growing. The community has been working hard to rebuild the downtown area through visual arts, music, and educational programs. Art museums, galleries, and public schools have been at the core of the community-changing endeavors, initiating a collaboration between Greenville Museum of Art and the Pitt County public school system, which involves at-risk high school students in community mural projects.

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