Engaging Communities: Notes on an Interdisciplinary Research/Creation Seminar

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Abstract:

This article traces the principles underlying the development and implementation of a graduate interdisciplinary course on socially engaged art. We undertook this course as a collaborative effort between our disciplines of social work and image arts. As educators who have a passion for social change and the arts, we sought to introduce students to methods and theories of engaging communities through collaborative artistic practices. In this article, we pause to reflect on our experiences designing and co-teaching the course over two years beginning with a discussion of the intentional pedagogy that guided the development of the course including an emphasis on experiential, active and peer learning. We illustrate these principles through concrete examples in course design including assessment methods that valued and promoted building classroom interaction and relationship-building. We also highlight two specific student case examples demonstrating issues related to engaging communities. The article ends with our reflections on own learning in the course and how this relates to principles of student engagement.

Key Words:

Socially Engaged Art, Social Work, Image Arts, Pedagogy, Community Building, Interdisciplinary Collaboration.

Setting the Stage: Building Community through Course Development

How did we end up with six armed police officers questioning us about our teaching practices? On what seemed like a usual Wednesday morning before class start, our theoretical discussions of community engagement came crashing down on us like a heavy thud of realization as we confronted the reality of what it could mean to introduce active learning in the classroom. We return to some of these realizations (and more on our unexpected visitors) as we proceed in this article where we share the process of implementing an interdisciplinary socially engaged art (SEA) graduate course between image arts and social work. This first term elective course drew roughly equal numbers of students (approximately 30) from the Masters of Social Work and the Masters of Fine Arts in Documentary Media--with a handful of Masters of Arts students from the connected discipline of Media Production.

Following a few years of planning and development, and after two iterations of the course, we are penning this reflection essay to consider how this curricular innovation has contributed to student learning in terms of working with community; and how this process has enriched us as educators and reflected our own building of community. In doing so, we join a chorus of other educators who subscribe to the principles of experiential learning as a way to support active learning, student engagement and application of theory to practice (Council of Ontario Universities, 2014; Kolb, 1984; Lu & Lambert, 2010; Moon, 2004; Moore, 2010). Our hope is to share our thinking notes with others embarking on innovative strategies to engage students in working with communities inside and outside the classroom.

The idea for the course, Socially Engaged Media: A Research/Creation Seminar, started in 2012 when we received a grant to develop a collaboration between social work and image arts. We began this process with a desire to work together having realized we had common interests but with not much of a rigid direction. We allowed the ideas to emerge organically through regular meetings over a period of a year. Our meetings included a third colleague with whom we have written about the course development process more amply (Wehbi, McCormick & Angelucci, 2016).

In this paper, we focus specifically on aspects of course implementation; however, our sense of community as educators, created through the development process, is relevant. Our meetings always included food and copious amounts of chocolate, the occasional walk in the woods or gallery visit, forging bonds between us that allowed us to delve deeper into how we each understood our roles as educators and practitioners (artists, photographers, social workers). Our meetings frequently ended with each of us walking away with more questions.

The deeper we went into the project, the more we realized that we wanted to focus on socially engaged art. Each author is an artist in her own right engaged in feminism and social justice. Discovering SEA occurred organically through being together in community as we tried to find a way to bridge practice with ideas. Thinking about *practice* as the "artwork" was liberating and revelatory. We learned that there is a whole field of artistic practice existing outside the studio model (post-studio and post-object), concerned with process and exchange and some kind of engagement that is more than

an intellectual or emotional response to the value-added object (Almenberg, 2010; Kester, 2004, 2011; Thompson, 2012).

This realization caused us to think about what community engagement truly is, and catalysed leaps in understanding that our work together emulated the time needed to develop relationships with community. The creation of relationships and processes takes time to mature, develop and be initiated to the degree that it could carry on past the time of the artist intervening or taking part in a particular project (Helguera, 2011). Much like the process of SEA, we needed that time to mature and grow with these new ideas as well.

Our work together began as dialogic, a conversation, echoing the strategies of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija who makes meals at art galleries and invites people to sit, eat and share in dialogue (Bishop, 2012). We engaged in this intentional process only to discover what that process was after several months of meeting. We commemorated this experience through the creation of the artefact/object: the course. The course has run twice keeping in mind the idea that the course itself is a generative space, which moves forward and is meant to be a spinning top for more conversation, dialogic processes, and engagement.

Course Principles & Assessments: Intentional Pedagogy

As we reflected on course development and how we have implemented our ideas for course design over the past two course iterations, we came to think of our process as "intentional pedagogy." This process occurs in an iterative manner alternating between periods of researching, development, meetings and reflection. Course principles that guided our process of intentional pedagogy included a recognition of active learning principles such as collaboration, interactivity, peer-learning and ultimately, co-creation and constructivist approaches to education that value peer-learning and instructor-student relationship building in the classroom (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010; Collins, 2008; Jones, 2009; Neuman & Blundo, 2000). As Neuman and Blundo iterate, within such approaches: "The instructor's relationship with the student results in the meeting of two private versions of the world, and the students' collaboration with other students compounds this exponentially" (p. 27). It was also important to take into account the applied nature of our disciplines (social work and documentary media) and to guide our intentional pedagogy with an emphasis on community engagement, the need to move from theory to practice, and to help students account for issues of ethics and power dynamics in their work with each other and with communities.

These pedagogical principles informed assessment methods, discussions, and classroom activities. Assessment methods took the form of a number of presentations, which were essential in introducing students to one another on a deeper level. Whole class presentations were more effective than a small group activity because everyone became familiar with each other rather than simply getting to know the handful of people in a small group activity. This was intentional, as we wanted students to be able to form interdisciplinary groups for their major group assignment where they were expected to design a community-based socially engaged response to a social issue. It was therefore critical to allow classroom space for documentary media and social work students to get to know each other because they have different starting points of reference.

The sharing started on the first day with brief introductions where the students would say who they were and state their discipline. The graduate students from each discipline had already met in other core courses in their own programs; but this was their first introduction to students from the other discipline. This round of introductions was followed by a second set of individual presentations where students discussed their backgrounds and interests in an engaging way. We modelled this presentation by each introducing ourselves and our areas of interest/focus using a performative and interactive approach. The first author shared her passion for creating artist books by handing out materials and taking students through a brief workshop where a sheet of paper transforms into a book through a series of folds; the second author recapped her journey to social work and photography through the literal and metaphorical unpacking of a box of objects symbolizing various steps in her trajectory, ultimately inviting students to handle the materials. Following our examples, students again introduced themselves with a focus on what they were going to be working on for their theses. The next two classes saw the students perform presentations where each student addressed personal areas of interest with an emphasis on how they hope to engage communities in their work as media makers or social workers. Throughout these presentations, they brought personal pieces of themselves and used such things as games, post-its, pictures, films, and food as a means of involving members of the class.

This type of presentation moves beyond the banking model of education to one that seeks a deeper connection among participants in a classroom setting. Reflecting on her own learning as an educator, Jackson (2017) notes the importance of moving beyond traditional lecture formats: "What I came to realize was that students need time in order to engage. A traditional lecture, no matter how intriguing the topic or animated the presenter, does not provide such time" (p. 4). Engaging students in an active way through the presentations we designed was a somewhat nerve-racking process because they went beyond a basic introduction and asked presenters to reveal a part of themselves at a deeper level. Modelling the first presentation was an important aspect of our intentional pedagogy because we needed to demonstrate an authentic engagement by taking the same risks we were asking our students to take (East & Chambers, 2007). Our interactive presentations set the tone for students allowing them the mental space to experiment with styles beyond talk/text, and to transform the presentation into an experience that could draw others in. It was important to model this expectation of interactivity and community engagement early on in the course and to ensure that students knew what they were expected to do.

This set of presentations was followed by a second presentation assignment where students now turned their attention to academic and artistic bodies of work to select an artist or art project that resonates for them in light of their expressed concerns. Topics ranged from artists working on issues of environmental degradation, Indigenous sovereignty, racism, sexism, mental health, heteronormativity, and sexual violence, among others.

The two introductory individual presentations allowed for a rapprochement between students across disciplines, as they discovered a set of shared concerns. Indeed, following the last set of presentations, we engaged students in a debrief where we asked them to identify common themes. We then put these themes before the class

written on pieces of paper and hung at various locations in the room. We asked students to form groups based on the themes that spoke most to them. This activity began a process of coalescing student interests into groups, throughout which interdisciplinary linkages were formed, as students now gathered around common *thematic* areas, not their educational program.

This process of interdisciplinary group creation resonated further with students as we discussed the role of transversal politics in SEA projects (Thompson, 2015). Creating the links to SEA made sense because as students move beyond their own disciplinary boundaries they are brought together not by their identity or their politics of difference, but instead by a politics of shared concerns. Students' interests in a specific topic brought together their different disciplinary lenses catalysing a shared outlook on a specific issue. Once the students realised these affinities and started to self-organize, they spent more time together outside of class building trust, and establishing that shared space of concern even as they continued to recognize their differences. Students were involved as partners in a space of co-creation of the classroom environment (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016).

In this sense, the process of interdisciplinary group formation mirrored a type of community politics and collaboration based on building community instead of maintaining fixed positions and doing "solidarity" work, which has the potential to continue to emphasize differences (Thompson, 2015). Students worked together to bridge disciplinary gaps as they developed a genuine understanding of their shared areas of concern. This relationship-building served them well as their work together culminated in a group proposal presentation where they designed (and implemented, in some cases) a SEA project.

Case Examples: Engaging Community

Here, we provide examples of projects where student presentations and projects intersected with community realities and concerns to shape learning moments for students and instructors. The first example looks at the unintended consequences of an interactive individual student presentation; while the second example highlights the learnings that take place when students are guided by unarticulated assumptions in their work with communities.

Example 1: Individual Student Presentation

At the start of this article, we relayed an incident where we had an unexpected visit from the police. Here, we discuss what brought this about through an example of a student presentation that seemed innocuous on its own but generative when combined with interactivity and a desire to engage community.

As one of the SEA presentations, a student chose to present on the work of internationally-acclaimed artist Candy Chang and her project entitled "Before I die" (please see: http://candychang.com/work/before-i-die-in-nola/). Chang reflects on mortality and human desire as she prompts participants to consider what they would wish to do before they die. To this end, Chang invites passers-by to articulate their goals or dreams of something they'd like to do before passing away (e.g. swim in the ocean, dance naked, etc.). The project originated in New Orleans after the artist had

lost someone close to her. In the first imagining she painted the side of an abandoned house with black chalkboard paint and wrote "Before I Die I want to…" leaving coloured chalk for people to respond with. The instigation was the desire to be reminded of the preciousness of life and the need to live each day to its fullest. Within a day people started filling it in with things they'd always wanted to do. It was a generative, anonymous work engaging people who may have otherwise walked past. It was also a real affirmation of life. It has since travelled the world.

Returning to the example of the individual presentations in class, our student had wanted to engage the principle of interactivity in presenting Chang's work. In order to underline the generative qualities that embody the artist's piece, the student put up two large pieces of paper following Chang's prescription and invited everyone up to write in those lines completing the thought, "Before I die I want to…" This engagement activity took place in the last session before Reading Week break. It was upon our return two weeks later, that the officers entered our classroom and asked if we knew anything about the "poster" on the wall. We explained that this was part of a classroom activity. Apparently, during the week-long break, someone had responded to Chang's innocent invitation on one of the sheets of paper with a violent message of threat. The police were investigating it as a potential safety risk.

The next 30 minutes of class time involved one of the instructors giving a statement to the police out in the hall, while the other remained in class debriefing with students as the implications of what just happened began to sink in. During this discussion, the instructor pressed the point that whatever our intentions, an artwork has a life of its own once it leaves our control. This was a perfect instance of what happens in the real world, where we can no longer assume shared perceptions, assumptions or values, nor predict an audience's reaction. We challenged the class to consider what it means to have this very real, disturbing response to art and—as SEA students—what they might do with it? This sparked a conversation about not being able to control an artwork in a community space as well as the intentionality behind the message (could it have been a callous joke, or more disturbingly, an actual wish?), which led to a conversation about safe space in general and safety on campus in particular.

Moreover, as the police had left one of the posters up on the wall of the classroom (shared with other courses in the faculty), we engaged students in a discussion of whether we should keep the poster up or remove it to avoid future incidents. This process of engaging students in decision-making emulated community collaboration processes, which we felt needed to be reconsidered for the classroom context. It also became clear to the group that different members of the class felt different levels of threat, depending on gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, physical stature, upbringing, and personality. As educators, there was pressure to make a decision about what to do with the poster, and the students voiced their support of or opposition to the idea of leaving the poster up. As the discussion evolved and in a moment of reflexivity, we realized that our responsibility as educators held us accountable to actually make that decision. We decided to take the poster down. However, this was a learning experience for students as the incident generated not only conversations valuable at the time of classroom discussions, but also a student group project about safety on campus and

how to negotiate safety in a complex environment that includes reflecting on how safety and social identity intersect in terms of markers such as race and gender identity.

Example 2: Project Proposal Presentation

As part of the final community engagement proposal assignment, a group of students did their final project on a community youth group with which they thought they shared elements of marginalized identities (sexualities, gender identity, age, ethnicity, race). This was the first team to start meeting and they were very committed to the project and to the community they were working with. Throughout their planning process, they demonstrated an extraordinary level of concern for youth and the complexities of working in ways that safeguard and value youth rights. Indeed, they took their time to think through the community consultation process, which they undertook in two main steps.

As a means of preparing themselves, our student group first met with a collective of artists involved in the chosen community to gain insight on what were some key issues facing youth. The group was thrilled with the responsiveness of the participants in their initial consultation. However, they had not factored in the element of age as a powerful advantage; in this instance, the artists they met with were young adults and their response seemed receptive. Following this meeting, their second step in the consultation process was to take the insights gained from meeting with the artists to develop and conduct a focus group with youth. The critical moment for our students occurred when the youth remained mostly silent; contrary to their expectations and despite attempts at working out every angle, there was minimal interaction or obvious engagement from the youth in the focus group.

In particular, our student group could not understand why the youth were not able to verbalize their thoughts even though the researchers shared so many elements of identity with them. Instead of the dialogic process they had experienced in the previous consultation, the youth were respectful and quiet but seemed to hold back. Our students had expected that their presentation would catalyse the conversation and be liberatory for the youth and they were very surprised and unprepared for the youth's mostly silent response.

As the students reflected on their experience, they shared with the class that they had underestimated differences between themselves and the youth and overestimated the impact of shared identities. Primarily, they had underestimated the impacts of adultism (LeFrançois, 2013; Singh, 2013) and how this could shape the relationship between youth and graduate students, perceived to be adults coming in to solicit information about issues affecting youth.

The student group relayed that one of their strategies of engagement was to give the youth doodle pads to use while the focus group was ongoing. Interestingly, the images that were produced expressed deep engagement by the youth about the issues being discussed, as opposed to their mostly silent verbal reaction. An important learning for all of us was the effectiveness of employing methods that resulted in non-verbal, private, and individual reactions, which proved a more useful approach to use with youth— rather than a formal focus-group style hinging on assumed sharing of identity markers. Simply sharing major aspects of identity was not sufficient to build rapport and trust with

that community. They discovered that providing youth with a different way to express themselves allowed them to feel less scrutinized by adults (e.g. drawing as the discussion was ongoing), as well as a different entry point into the conversation—on youth's own terms—as opposed to responding to questions asked by the adult students.

This incident was generative, allowing the class to consider how assumptions of shared identity could be a hindrance to building community collaborations. Moreover, students became engaged in re-evaluating what they value as a substantial response. Through sharing the actual doodle drawings (with youth permission), the rest of the class was able to learn from that group's experience. This was a significant revelation as the class came to understand that we tend to value certain types of sharing over others. The student group had the wisdom to engage the youth on several levels and came away with some powerful responses. Our class discussion focused on broadening our understanding of community engagement to consider that responses come in different packages, styles, and flavours, not only in direct answers to or in ways valued by the facilitators, as socially engaged artists.

The problem with assuming trust, understanding, affinity and cooperation based on shared identities occurred in numerous projects over the course of both years; whether based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture or age, students found again and again that such assumptions about shared affinities had to be left at the door as they had little place in building cooperative dynamics based on the interests and relationships of those present in the room.

Concluding Thoughts: Our Own Learning

In this article, we shared our reflections on offering an interdisciplinary course on socially engaged art. Throughout our discussion, we focused on the community engagement aspects of the course. The two examples we shared above illustrate how we engaged students in reflecting on processes and meanings of working with communities. We also reflected in this paper on how we implemented intentional pedagogical strategies to engage students and facilitate a shared learning environment where as educators, we modelled what we were requiring of students. As a final example, we offer here an activity that we held at the end of the course where we modelled engagement by sharing with students our own learning.

At the end of the course, we held a session where we focused specifically on issues of documentation in SEA. We wanted students to think about how there are multiple voices in communities and how in SEA, documentation is a shared act involving not only the artists, but also the communities with whom they work (Helguera, 2011). We devised an activity where we asked students to document their own process of learning pretending they would share this with future cohorts of students, using any medium they wished. In the first half of the session, students used drawing, performance, video and photography to create documentary artefacts and products to share their learning from the course; they presented these in the second half of the session. In keeping with our teaching philosophy and approach to the course where we engaged in a shared environment of learning with the students, we tasked ourselves to document our own learning as educators. In this way, we came full circle to the beginning of the course where we had started by modelling the introductory presentations.

In the first iteration of the course, we chose to document our learning by creating a sculpture/performance where we draw sticky notes denoting our key learnings from a bag. Unfolding each in front of the students, we shared our documentation of the course through language and gesture. In addition to the bag, the first author also created a paper airplane, the significance of which she did not explain until much later, as the meaning became clearer with time, as we both reflected on our learnings from the course.

The making of the airplane was a doodle of sorts, a nervous response to trying to encapsulate the learning that had transpired over the semester. Building on the first author's love of paper and books, the airplane grows out of the first fold book she created in the beginning of the course; it is an attempt at transforming the solidity of the book into flight. Using the hands to guide the mind, she modelled what we had tried to impress upon the students: the need to make and do what was intuitive and allowing the process to unfold without inhibition and the need to affix meaning. When working with communities and allowing others to be part of SEA processes (as opposed to a sole focus on the role of the artist in making meaning), we open up processes of creation, and a multiplicity of interpretations.

For the second author, the learning from the course manifested in two main processes; the first is trying to understand and affix meaning and knowledge; the second process is reflexive, questioning her need to know and to articulate a purpose, asking herself questions such as Do we ever understand what the artist intended with the work? Is it not about our own response to that work? Isn't SEA about allowing processes to unfold and not necessarily the way the artist may have envisioned? In fact, the airplane haunted her thoughts and pushed her to reflect on the need to engage in a process of letting go when working with community.

Our reflections on our learnings can be summed up in three main insights that can guide engagement of SEA with community. First, we need to trust the process of creation and collaboration as it unfolds. This means allowing ourselves as socially engaged artists to explore grey zones and complex concepts without needing to find the "right" answers. We saw a shift in student interactions as the course progressed; they began in the first few sessions by asking pointed questions about how SEA can be defined, seeking to find definitive descriptions. Over time, as students noticed that we were asking more questions than providing answers, they began to be attuned to open-ended processes of building relationships and engaging community. This shift manifested in moving away from needing to have the right answer, to recognizing the fluidity and complexity of community involvement. SEA is about being in an uncomfortable, ambiguous space of questioning.

Second, we learned how opening the space for collaborative learning allowed students to push beyond disciplinary boundaries to learn from each other. Members of each discipline felt comfortable at different moments in the course; for example, documentary media students when cameras were being used, and social work students in discussions of community participation. We contributed to interdisciplinary learning by creating moments where students were expected to engage with each other across their specific disciplines. We also modelled this interdisciplinarity during a documentation activity in the second iteration of the course. This time, we created a

performance where we literally exchanged clothes (hat, jacket) and used each other's iPads to take pictures and show each other what we saw from our differing perspectives. We modelled being open to sharing perspectives across disciplines to open space for contributions and collaboration. Allowing for dialogue across disciplines enabled students to learn from each other and to build on their collaborations.

Finally, a key learning for us relates to the importance of experiential learning in bridging theory and practice, starting from the first session where we modelled introductory presentations, and continuing throughout the course as we expected students to engage with each other and with communities. We not only spoke theoretically about SEA concepts and notions of community collaboration, but also applied them in the classroom, which offered an example to students of how to bridge their course learning to their practice as social workers or documentary artists. This bridging also allowed students to feel like they were in the midst of grappling with questions directly related to their practice and/or their thesis and helped create that link from theory to practice. Through their community consultations and interdisciplinary collaborations, students lived through SEA, moving it from an abstract set of practices, to being "real" and immediate. The value of our intentional pedagogical practices as educators became visible as we saw the importance of embodying SEA concepts.

Not unlike the paper airplane, a flimsy and wholly inadequate flying machine, we have launched a raft of ideas, folded together, into the future in hopes of updrafts and many helping hands to keep it aloft. As we watch our students go into their careers, we are encouraged to see many of the characteristics of SEA in their projects and practices. Knowing we had some hand in these developments encourages us to advocate for interdisciplinarity and collaboration. Sadly, this will have to wait for us since co-teaching a course is a great luxury within fiscally constrained academic institutions. We hope that our respective schools will allow the course to go forward again. Meanwhile, we hold dear our learnings and bring the philosophy of SEA and intentional pedagogy to all our other courses.

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