

## **Art and Service Learning: The Magnificent Moonsters: A Community College Art and Service Learning Project**

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### **Introduction**

When the vans arrived and the children gushed through the glass doors, the college art building came alive with shouts and giggles as children grabbed the hands of parents or grandparents and pulled them over to the colorful sculptures on display. Proud of their artwork, they pointed and smiled broadly, yelling to be heard over the crowd: "This one is mine!" Then they introduced the college students who were their partners in art. Together over the course of six weeks, these children and college students imagined, wrote stories, drew pictures, and eventually created three-dimensional figurative sculptures that they called the "Magnificent Moonsters." This lively art opening celebrated their service learning partnership.

The celebration represented the potential of service learning when integrated in college visual art courses. Service learning – a pedagogy which links relevant and meaningful community service with academic learning – has gained momentum in the last ten years, implemented widely on college campuses across the United States in courses across the curriculum. Over 900 colleges and universities around the nation are members of Campus Compact (Campus Compact, 2000, p. 1), a coalition that "promotes community service that develops students' citizenship skills and values, encourages collaborative partnerships between campuses and communities, and assists faculty who seek to integrate public and community engagement into their teaching and research." According to the Campus Compact's *Annual Service Statistics 2000*, over 712,000 students participated in more than 13,000 college courses in that year. Despite this trend, few mainstream journals have published articles on the philosophy, research, or practice of connecting fine art with community service learning. A review of the literature and a descriptive case study of one foundational studio art class at a community college in the Northwest reveal the value of integrating service learning within visual arts courses. The arts reflect and express community values.

### **Art and Service Learning: The Theory of the Practice**

At the foundation of a discussion of art connected to community is the philosophy of John Dewey, father of experiential education and advocate of civic engagement. In his book *Art as Experience* (1935, p. 81), Dewey argues that:

“Works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvelous aids in the creation of such a life. The remaking of the material of experience in the act of expression is not an isolated event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work. In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity.”

Dewey argues that individual expression and community are interconnected. By creating this connection, the art object unites people in a collective, creative process.

Going beyond Dewey’s theory and searching the published literature on the subject of the arts linked with service learning, however, reveals few results. I expected that by now – with proponents calling for more empirical research on service learning, with journals featuring service learning in themed issues, and with numerous books published on service learning across the disciplines – a number of scholars would have published research describing applications and detailing outcomes for students, faculty, and community partners. Searches, however, turned up articles that I had found in the past, and most of these focused on the reasons for including service learning in the arts and humanities, with a few describing specific applications or research studies.

Among these authors, Carol Jeffers (2000) reports on a mixed-method research study, published in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* and focused on pre-service teachers in arts methods classes in the California State University system. She describes how college students learned to guide middle and high school students through university art galleries. Jeffers writes that the project was founded on Deweyan experiential learning as well as the “border pedagogy” of Giroux (1992, p. 109) who argues that students need to “cross borders, to work closely in order to understand themselves in relation to others.” Through pre- and post-tests and drawings, interviews, and observations, Jeffers describes these students’ changes in attitudes toward art and art teaching. Their experience with service learning changed their views of art and gave them confidence to teach art to young people.

Dan Lloyd (2000), from the philosophy department at Trinity College, includes a chapter in David Lisman’s collection of articles on service learning in philosophy, also published on his web site. Lloyd’s students in a philosophy of art course served at arts-related organizations around the Hartford area, including local cultural centers, senior centers, galleries, and prison art programs. Lloyd writes that their “street-level encounters with art animated every classroom discussion and student writing” (par. 13). More importantly, “in the aftermath of aesthetic service learning, students never again see art as a cultural ‘given,’ but instead begin to appreciate the diversity of voices and interests that intersect in the production of art” (par. 17). Lloyd argues that art and

service are a natural connection, giving students a wide view of the importance of art in community life.

In a more philosophical article for the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, George Handley (2001) argues for integrating service learning in humanities courses, calling for a stronger connection between the arts and the communities in which they are created. He lists a series of reasons, including the importance of “teaching students that there is a vitality to the arts in community life, and most importantly, in the very places where they reside” (p. 57). Arts organizations need volunteers to operate, students need to learn from role models in the arts community, and higher education benefits, “empowering them to seek ways to bring ideas to, and from, the community” (p. 57). Since the arts are alive in the community, connecting college students with real artists and arts organizations makes the creative process more relevant.

After reviewing these discussions of the visual arts connected to service learning, I broadened my search to include a wider range of humanities subjects. The list of results included numerous articles on the subject of composition studies—a discipline that I know is well-connected to service learning—and articles on language/culture classes, history, and even theater. Sociology and psychology, philosophy, environmental science, and other fields have received much attention from researchers. Moreover, miscellaneous newspaper articles and web sites featured good news about community arts projects K-12 schools, and at local colleges and universities. The local press likes to print inspiring stories of education making a difference in the community.

For instance, Mary Zimmerle (2003) writes one of many newsy articles on applications of service learning within K-12 humanities classrooms. She suggests, “By creating space in which social change is enabled by both the artist and the viewer, the boundaries between artist and participant are blurred and a solid community connection emerges” (par. 5). Zimmerle suggests that students translate their “talents and passions” into “meaningful service learning pieces and projects” such as murals, community art classes, and other community events (par. 4).

Another source of creative inspiration for linking the arts and service learning is a themed issue of the *Service Learning Network* (1998), which describes a variety of projects K-college. For instance, Sarah Graham Petto (1998, p. 3) describes several community-oriented art projects in the Madison, Wisconsin area in which students create public art for the benefit of local nonprofit organizations while learning about individual artists and cultural expression. She writes, “Service learning enables us to connect our artmaking with the wider community in which we serve and learn. The arts, with their long tradition of cultural connection, problem-solving, creativity, and

reflection, are a natural place for service learning.” Reports such as these make the case for art students connecting with their communities.

Researching from another direction, I decided to try Google. The number of “edu” web sites that appeared on the list along with hundreds of “org” sites revealed that service learning is not absent from college and university campuses. Apparently, people are simply not publishing their good work in mainstream journals. Barbara Holland (1999) explains that the factors influencing faculty participation in service learning vary widely depending on the institution, and faculty who participate are often those who are already “involved in public service and outreach” (p. 149). With the addition of service learning to their schedules, they may have little time to write. I also understand that artist-teachers often spend available research time in the studio, not necessarily working with words.

Colleges and universities need to support service learning faculty members in their time-consuming yet highly-rewarding applications of service learning within college classes. Service learning administrators and staff can make the process manageable for faculty through a strong support system and can highlight their efforts through press releases and research. Connecting students with community agencies, designing meaningful projects, and publishing the results makes visible the civic nature of education.

To illustrate the connection between art and service learning, I return to the case study of a community college art course and the path leading to the creation of the “Magnificent Moonsters.” With one-class released time from my full-time duties as an English department member, I worked as the faculty coordinator for service learning at an Inland Northwest community college for five years. In this role, I collaborated with faculty across the curriculum as they sought creative ways to apply service learning within their individual classes, finding ways to challenge students, fulfill course outcomes, and serve actual community needs. One of these full-time faculty members, Michael Horswill, teaches a range of visual arts classes, including core college classes in art history and studio classes for graphic design and fine arts majors. In Horswill’s first application of service learning within an illustration class, students created artwork requested by local nonprofit agencies, such as posters, greeting cards, t-shirts, logo designs, and other promotional materials. The project served the community and gave students real-life practice in the field of illustration, working with clients and producing a final illustration. On the other hand, the students did not directly serve the mission of these agencies—such as helping abused children, serving seniors in long-term care facilities, or working for environmental causes. Fortunately, students reported feeling appreciation

from the agency supervisors and satisfaction with the process and projects. The agencies confirmed the overall value of these students' projects.

In his second application of service learning within a foundational three-dimensional design class, the process was more of a challenge yet resulted in more direct community connections. In Horswill's philosophy of teaching studio art, he believes that the arts create opportunities for constructive problem-solving and critical thinking, requiring students to apply their skills and knowledge of the elements of art within specific projects and for specific spaces, not only expressing their individuality but also being conscious of the space between the art object and viewers' aesthetic response. Public art projects express individual artists' vision of their place in the community and often become gravitational centers for public discourse. In community college classes, Horswill says, "Art students need to engage in discourse about what and why they are creating and the effect their art will have on the wider community." Moreover, they need to work together as a community of artists whose purpose is to enhance the lives of those around them, whether in raising awareness of issues or beautifying spaces.

As a result, instead of simply tacking artwork to a bulletin board in the art building, Horswill's students spread out across campus, creating art that engages viewers. Some of this work is purely playful—such as gargoyles glowering over the edges of library book stacks or trolls camping under stairwells—but other projects raise people's consciousness of the importance of art in our world. For instance, Horswill returns annually to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a focus for a variety of student projects, making students aware of the privilege of making art in a free society as well as the rights they have to express themselves. He emphasizes Article 27:

"(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits"

and Article 19:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Art is not simply tangential or decorative; art is not just pretty objects or colorful scenes on walls; instead, visual arts display the wide-open potential for the human spirit to be wholly creative, enhancing the life of the community.

With these ideas at the center of Horswill's classes, he considered a range of optional projects. Rather than simply creating a public mural, sculpture garden, or human rights tree, which

all found their way onto an initial list, he wanted to connect his students to a community agency in a way that would make a personal difference in people's lives. Students needed to create art *with* rather than *for* people. The list narrowed as he considered working at schools or shelters for children, assisted living homes, or a local educational center for the developmentally disabled. All of these places included arts and crafts activities as therapy. Not all of them, however, would enable his students to practice college-level skills. The balance of serving and learning is critical; the community must benefit, but the students must also grow in their understanding of the academic subject.

As a result, Horswill decided that the most appropriate application of service learning was through Art on the Edge, a local after-school arts program sponsored by Saint Vincent de Paul. Begun in 1995, this program originally was intended for children living in their homeless shelter and transitional housing center, giving them a creative outlet for expression during a difficult period in their lives. With the success of the program, Ali Shute, the program director, opened their doors to include children from around the community. Now, every Wednesday afternoon, children ranging from around age three to eleven from the shelters and wider community meet in a warehouse next to the transitional housing center, creating all kinds of art, from self-portraits to holiday crafts. Horswill met during the semester before the project began with Shute and Amy Manning, a Vista Volunteer, to discuss the specific project and organize the events. They discussed how the mentoring relationship between each child and adult would be beneficial to all. According to a range of recent research, summarized on the web site for the National Mentoring Partnership (2003), relationships between adults and children can result in improved social skills, academic achievement, future goal setting, and other positive outcomes. Horswill hoped to motivate his college students with this added community benefit.

Within his two sections of Art 122, "Foundations of Three-dimensional Design," Horswill made this project an option, knowing that community college students have complex lives that may not allow several of them to commit to a number of extra Wednesday afternoons. Surprisingly, over half of the students or seventeen of twenty-nine students, agreed to participate. The other students were able to complete a meaningful project to contribute to the whole. In many service learning courses, designing strong alternatives is important, resulting in similar academic outcomes for all students. Editor Jeffrey Howard's (2001) *Service learning Course Design Workbook* emphasizes that service learning courses should not "compromise academic rigor" and should "establish learning objectives" for all students in the course (p. 16). Students participating in service may

learn more civic or social responsibility, but with discussion and reflection assignment, these goals spill over into the entire classroom.

The details of the project came straight from the imagination of Horswill and were refined in discussions with Shute, Manning, and the college students. Horswill explains that academic goals for this project were inspired by Picasso's and other modernists' views of children's art. Jonathan Fineberg (1997, p. 124) in his book *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist*, comments:

“...any number of artists have appropriated the language of children's drawings – sometimes even the drawings themselves – in order to tap into their expressive immediacy.”  
“...Indeed, it is clear that many artists today seek a richer, more authentic experience of the present through an encounter with the child's "innocent" eye.”

The creative expression of children teaches college adults about new ways of looking at art and the world.

In the grand plan, Horswill's college students and Art on the Edge children would meet and create “Moonsters,” conceived as creatures that live on the moon who are responsible for creating something on the Earth: books, trees, rocks, butterflies, and other important aspects of these children's lives. Together the children and college students would draw the names of various moonsters from a hat, write mythological stories explaining their powers, and create three-dimensional sculptures that depict these creatures in appropriate materials, colors, and other artistic features. Using their imaginations, writing stories, and applying their artistic skills within a community setting would make these sculptures come alive.

Over the course of four weeks of Wednesdays, the children and college students went to work. Many of the college students said that the imaginations of the children were surprising and inspirational. In the first two sessions, the children discussed and wrote stories with great energy and drew lovely but abstract versions of each moonster, challenging the college students to make sense of the images. Back in the college classroom between sessions, the college students worked to build the sculptures, problem-solving together. Using the principles of three-dimensional design, the college students selected appropriate materials. The shapes, colors, and textures were important for conveying each moonster's creative purpose. Limiting the size of the sculptures to two feet in height focused them on design rather than scale. The Rock Moonster required carving foam into a sturdy, stocky figure, then applying plaster and embedding pebbles. The Book Moonster included an actual book as a torso and eyes collaged with storybook pictures. The Bird Moonster needed to have feathers, of course, but the child's drawing also inspired bug-like antennae and flat duck feet.

To add to the big picture, the students who were not participating in the service learning option created a “Moonster Village.” They designed appropriate houses and other landscape features to match each moonster, and so the Lightning Moonster had a Z-shaped house, and the Shoe Moonster had a shoe-like street sign. Back at the warehouse, during the third and fourth sessions, the college students allowed the children to glue on objects or paint vivid colors. Gradually, the moonsters came alive.

After four weeks, a celebration art opening brought together all participants, including parents and others from the community. The Moonster Village filled a giant table covered in a glittering aqua surface, with moonster houses, street signs, trees, the children’s stories, and the moonsters themselves standing in various action poses. With cookies and punch, the children bounded around the tables, pulled parents, laughed, and danced. The college students smiled and basked in the press’s flashing cameras. Service learning made art come alive in the imaginations of children and the skills of college students.

In class discussions after the celebration, the college students agreed that the project had been enjoyable yet challenging. They said that creating the figures tested their abilities to think creatively, solve problems, and apply their design skills. They also agreed that working with these children, many of whom lived in the transitional housing center, gave them a broader perspective of the importance of art for developing a whole person. Several of them said that their experience confirmed their interest in pursuing art education, giving them experience working with children. Moreover, the college students felt that during their conversations with the children, they may have planted the seeds of college education as a future goal. With even a short-term connection, the mentoring relationships may bloom later in these children’s lives.

The experience was so positive for the children that Shute and Manning expressed their hopes for future partnerships with Horswill’s classes. As a way to show their appreciation, the college students decided to give their Moonsters to the children, along with certificates and thank-you cards. In reflecting on the project, Horswill said, “Considering how many people were involved, the project went smoothly and exceeded my expectations. It gave my students the opportunity to be teachers—and therefore to learn more about their skills and art materials—and it gave the children the opportunity to see their ideas and drawings recognized as having value in a community setting.”

Sharing successful applications of service learning within art classes brings the practice out of the fine print of college art syllabuses into mainstream practice. Studies on the academic and

community benefits of art in public contexts would emphasize that art is a community effort. The arts reflect and shape children's and adults' views of the world—and Moon. With the fine arts forever in danger of being defined as unscientific or fringe subjects, civic engagement is crucial to their survival. In his recent book, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002, p. 3), Elliot Eisner writes that “Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture.” Eisner calls for more research in arts education, saying, “Among the most important kinds of research needed in the field are studies of teaching and learning” (p. 215). Creativity comes alive by placing emphasis on the community connections enabled through education in the arts.

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