

A Collective Case Study of Veterans in an Arts and Crafts Program

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Keywords

Community arts, art education, theory, case studies.

Abstract

Agostinone-Wilson (2001) described how a community's interests and values can be reflected through the expressions of using craft items and creative activities. This article documents work with three veteran case studies at the Dallas Veteran's Hospital in Texas and how veterans gained a sense of empowerment by making crafts together and how they expressed themselves. As a result, the veterans involved in the arts and crafts community gained knowledge through a broader sense of humanity and collaboration and encouraged them to have a positive learning experience.

Introduction

Painting and drawing have always allowed me to construct personal meaning, contributing to my sense of identity. Creating unusual visual solutions to creative problems is my way of thinking outside of the box. Throughout my life, I have always allowed art to be my outlet for how I felt about myself and my life experiences. That was, however, until I joined the military in order to help pay for art college. The negative experiences that I experienced during my service in the military hindered my arts and crafts production. As a soldier, I was conditioned to lose my individuality, and after a few years, I felt that I had lost my sense of personal identity. Furthermore, I had no one inside or outside the military to support me creatively during this period, and in fact, even after I left the U.S. Army and was a free civilian, I did not create any art at all for the next year.

The only reason I started making art again was that my mother convinced me to go back to college at the Art Institute of Houston. Once I felt supported within a creative environment, I reconnected my identity with art because there were others around me who also loved it. Slowly, I experienced a personal transformation when I interacted with others who shared a passion for art, and as a result, this influenced me to begin making paintings and drawings again. This reconnection to creative activity gave me a renewed sense of empowerment, understanding of my world, and my ability to communicate with others. Creating art became a cathartic purification of the soul as I transformed myself within a creative environment that supported my transition from the military lifestyle, leaving behind a world in which one is barred from thinking for oneself, and expected simply to obey orders.

A watershed moment for the importance of art in both my personal and professional lives came by accident when I discovered the arts and crafts room during a visit to the Dallas VA Hospital for a doctor's appointment. There was an art contest in the main area of the hospital, and I learned that I could enter a painting if I went to the arts and crafts room. It was then that I discovered there was a place in the hospital that supported creative activities for the community of veterans. Since that day, I have remained a frequent visitor to the arts and crafts room, where I have been able to connect with others through my artwork, becoming a part of a community supporting creative expression. This connection comes from establishing dialogue, exchanging narratives, and seeing things from others' perspectives. It has been especially meaningful to me to help other veterans enjoy arts and crafts experiences, since art helped me regain my personal identity after my military experience, and for that reason, I decided to help other veterans by volunteering in arts and crafts rooms at VA Hospitals. I have volunteered at the VA Hospital in Dallas since 2007, and at the recreation room at the VA Center in Fort Worth during 2008-2009. These experiences have been personally fulfilling on many levels, having enabled me to help other veterans as I shared personal experiences. I gained a sense of purpose through my volunteering experiences and a feeling of empowerment as I helped other veterans gain art skills and knowledge.

For me, the word empowerment means to gain a positive purpose in one's life that builds self-esteem and personal meaning, but this type of empowerment can be hard to attain for veterans who feel isolated and therefore have a limited outlook on life. A few also bear the weight of mental and physical conditions that may hinder their ability to seek the proper help to build self-esteem and sense of self. That is why it is extremely fortunate that veterans who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental and physical problems may find therapeutic opportunities through arts and crafts centers on military bases and hospitals. My own experiences have shown me that the arts and crafts room at the Veterans Medical Center

in Dallas is just such an environment that supports veterans' efforts to build self-empowerment by nurturing creative recreation.

Since spending time in such an environment has proven so essential to my own process of regaining a strong sense of personal identity, in this study, I am interested in exploring the ways other veterans have experienced self-empowerment in arts and crafts settings in VA hospitals. Being immersed in a community of shared culture is essential for an individual to gain a sense of empowerment (Daniel & Stuhr, 2006). Moreover, as postmodern theory points out, multiple realities show the unique and diverse ways humans learn through social interchanges in situated social environments. Inside the VA hospital arts and crafts room, such learning experiences, based on dialogue among veterans, are essential to fostering individual growth, self-esteem, and empowerment. Therefore, I have chosen as my methodology qualitative research in an arts-related environment, with a special focus on veterans as an underrepresented group.

Throughout my study, it has been especially important to gain insights into individuals' perceptions, since the new knowledge derived from the study of interpersonal experiences can illuminate the unique culture of a particular situated learning environment in ways that enrich the pedagogy of art education research. The three case studies that form the core of this study can, then, be described as a discourse of learning about a distinct sub-culture, the world of veterans. Apropos of the cultural setting of VA hospitals' arts and crafts rooms, it is important to note that while veterans who spend time in arts and crafts rooms are also often involved in art therapy, the experiences this study examines, while therapeutic, should not be confused with art therapy, and I am not an art therapist. Nevertheless, I have witnessed the power and significance of veterans' experiences inside the arts and crafts room, as their interactions lead to confidence and empowerment. As this study will demonstrate, these veterans' voices are passionate with the desire to speak for themselves, and my study invites the reader to explore and interpret the ways in which arts, crafts, and veterans' communities convey the variety and depth of their experiences of empowerment. This is evident when one of my participants Marine said "I feel that coming here makes me feel alive. It's better than being at home. I can share my work with others and teach them how to make beads. It helps me not think about the people I killed in Nam (Vietnam)" (Personal communication, June 12, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

For many veterans, feeling disenfranchised within society and misunderstood is a common story (Tick, 2005). Similarly, some veterans do not know where to find public forums that will allow them to transition back to civilian life or express their feelings and experiences as ex-soldiers (Tick, 2005). Unfortunately, many find little assistance, and they struggle through these

difficult life changes. Consequently, such veterans typically remain secluded, invisible in general society, struggling to communicate with people in the general population. One veteran describes such an orientation:

It can be frustrating. It's why a lot of veterans tend to stick around each other, because they share the same perspective . . . trying to explain what it's like being in a war is like trying to relate a spiritual experience to someone who doesn't believe in God. (Clinic Helps Veterans with PTSD, 2009, p. 3)

Difficulty assimilating into general society for many veterans comes from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This condition, very difficult to heal, is best understood as an identity disorder and 'soul wound' (Tick, 2005). Tick (2005) describes it as an emotional pain affecting the personality at the deepest level. In fact, many veterans share the struggle of deep emotional scars that affect the quality of their everyday lives (Tick, 2005). Post-traumatic memories are hard to forget, and the effects for veterans who experience PTSD can be triggered by sights, sounds, or smells that are seemingly innocent to others.

A PTSD trigger is a traumatic memory, causing the individual to feel threatened and unable to control the recurrence of the traumatic recollection (Herman, 1992). Triggers can be brought on by visual images, sounds, memories, scenes in a film or on television, the behavior of others, the environment, or the mere presence of certain individuals (Herman, 1992). This deeply affects the quality of life and potential to socialize for some veterans. Creating arts and crafts based on their painful experiences is an outlet for some veterans to discover meaning in the experience that allows them to work through PTSD issues. Veterans' needs for creative work during the process of recovery is not commonly understood. I strongly believe that a community like the arts and crafts room at the Dallas VA Medical Center should be recognized and valued because veterans' voices and personal histories can contribute to learning about art education in diverse settings. It is here that arts and crafts become part of a learning process that can help them heal, and, in some instances, fully overcome personal obstacles.

Through my discussions with veterans at the Veteran's Centers in Fort Worth and Dallas, I learned that art helps them decrease mental stress and makes them feel better emotionally and physically. In fact, some veterans shared that they felt that they had no purpose or happiness in their lives until they started coming to the recreation room. Importantly, over time, I observed that the veterans who felt this way achieved such results specifically from spending time with other veterans in an arts and crafts environment. I intend to examine how the activities and interactions within that environment instill a sense of purpose, confidence, and empowerment in select veterans. What can we learn from these veterans and how might that knowledge be applied to other art education settings?

The Role of the Arts and Crafts Program in the Veteran Hospitals

In order to analyze the specific ways arts and crafts environments benefit veterans working to overcome personal difficulties, this study explores the details of arts and crafts work veterans engaged in as they forged communities of healing and self-empowerment. Part of those activities include making craft kits that were donated by the non-profit organization, Help Hospitalized Veterans (HHV) (2009). HHV distributes craft kits to veterans, who may choose to complete crafts inside or outside of the hospital. Their website describes a four-year study conducted at thirteen VA hospitals that found that the craft kits enjoy a 98.7% positive response from veterans (Help Hospitalized Veterans, p.1). Inside the arts and crafts room, the main creative production by veterans is studio art, expressive works that experiment with various media such as paint, pastel, and ink to explore individual visions, but many also choose to work with HHV craft kits that include clocks, leather crafts, beadwork, and model airplanes and cars.

While I have personally observed that veterans enjoy creating arts and crafts, this study seeks to examine the deeper benefits of such work. Is art-making simply “fun”, or like myself, are veterans obtaining something more from these activities and interactions? Arts and crafts can play an important role in helping individuals develop psychomotor, artistic, and social skills, allowing an individual to engage in acts of creation by following basic instructions, without training in the arts (Agostinone-Wilson, 2001). In my definition, art can be any creative production expressed in any media that has narrative meaning for the artist. Such elements encompass emotion, style, and subject matter personal to the artist. Clearly, then, the nuts and bolts of craft kits—following instructions, assembling pieces in a sequential order that results in a pre-determined product—is not art, lacking the creative component that releases individual expression necessary for deep therapeutic treatment (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). While it is certainly true that craft kits may be individualized by adding decoration to the final product, generally speaking, craft making functions in therapeutic settings as “busy work” (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Nevertheless, for veterans who lack experience making art, crafts do make possible new avenues to self-expression. My volunteer experiences have shown me that veterans gain a sense of camaraderie by making arts and crafts together and sharing stories of their experiences with each other. Agostinone-Wilson (2001) notes that “the community is both social and isolating at once as crafting is marked by periods of solitude and sharing . . . we can view the sameness of craft items as expressions of . . . community interests and values” (p.90). The power of craft for veterans, then, lies in the social interaction that flows naturally from the arts and crafts process in a community setting.

In almost four years of volunteering, I carefully observed veterans’ interactions and discussions during and after making crafts, and my own collaboration in such processes showed

me how veterans learn best amid creative and collaborative processes. Connecting with veterans through conversations as I assisted them, they shared their ideas and stories with me. What is known about veterans and their art depends on the quality of the relationships they create in the community (Cleveland, 2005). I learned that, like me, veterans gained a sense of peace from making arts and crafts, and their crafting associations formed an important community for them. Moreover, arts and crafts in such a community setting sparked dialogue and mutual critique (Agostinone-Wilson, 2001), which opened discussions reflecting the interests and values of the participants, demonstrating the importance of the arts and crafts community as a forum of individual and communal expression.

For example, most veterans expressed their desire to help others make crafts and were empathetic to those who suffered mental stress. A few encouraged veterans who made crafts to add creative details that were more personal to individuals. These veterans affirmed the value of personal meaning, encouraging others to think more reflectively about what they had made. This is evidenced when one of my participants Alexander told me, “I really feel good when people ask me advice or ask me for help when painting” (Personal communication, July 15, 2010). Some craft kits were easier than others to assemble, allowing more severely disabled veterans access to creating crafts as well. Veterans could bring the crafts home if they chose to, or do them at the hospital where they would have interaction and support from other veterans. I also observed how many of these veterans started as novices and after acquiring the knowledge and productive skills to make arts and crafts, helped newcomers in the arts and craft room. They taught them techniques in art production as part of the socio-cultural practices of this veteran community.

This type of situated learning means that veterans participated in frameworks structured by learning art production in a respectful and communicative setting. This was reinforced with rules and regulations posted inside the recreation room (see Appendix A). While arts and crafts may not have been the vehicle for artistic expression in and of themselves, the ways that veterans created communities of learning that specifically addressed the needs of individuals working to overcome mental and emotional challenges established the arts and crafts community as a platform for individual expression and community communication that functioned in a deeply therapeutic manner.

Research Questions

Consequently, it is my hypothesis that veterans perceive a sense of empowerment when they participate in creative activities and interact with others within a supportive environment. My dissertation focuses on the following research question: 1) Do veterans perceive that they become empowered through their creative activities and interactions inside an arts and crafts room at the VA hospital in Dallas, Texas?

Empowerment in this context is defined as gaining self-esteem and motivation within oneself. This includes becoming more confident and positive, as well as gaining the ability to learn about one's own identity. Sub-questions for this study are:

a) If so, to what degree does making arts and crafts influence veterans' perceptions of empowerment?

b) If so, to what degree do interactions among veterans influence their perceptions of empowerment?

The Historical Role of the Arts and Crafts Program in Veterans' Hospitals

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there emerged new interest in the therapeutic values of art for recreational purposes, especially in hospitals (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Researchers began to study the spontaneous art products of psychotic individuals, along with experimenting with music therapy and psychodrama. Fleshman & Fryrear (1981) describe music therapy as the clinical use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals with a music therapist. Psychodrama is a method of psychotherapy in which clients are encouraged to continue and complete their actions through dramatization, role playing, and dramatic self-presentation (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). In addition, After World War I, occupational therapy was formally introduced as a treatment that included arts and crafts (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). The role of the arts and crafts program within VA hospitals across the United States originated through the treatment of veterans returning from World War II. Amid the tremendous demands made upon the therapeutic community by the large number of returning disabled soldiers, new therapeutic techniques were created, including artistic approaches (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Such efforts formed the groundwork for the use of art therapy during the 1960s, an era in which art therapy grew quickly as a field, and art therapists dispersed widely into hospitals (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981).

Arts and Crafts at the Dallas VA Hospital

Although this program closed permanently in August 2012, the role of the arts and crafts program at the Dallas VA Hospital was to create a comfortable environment for veterans where they can feel safe and which supports therapeutic recreational services, encouraging veterans to make arts and crafts with the support of compassionate and empathetic volunteers. The room generally had walls stacked with craft kits of model cars, airplanes, beadwork, leather wallets, ceramics, wood kits, and painting kits. Not at all like a hospital room, it provides a studio environment that contrasts with the sterile feeling in other areas of the hospital.

For the purposes of this study, “craft” is defined as something that comes from a craft kit, has step-by-step instructions and does not necessarily elicit personal style or expression by the craft maker. Generally speaking, scholars do not consider crafts a creative therapy that releases individual expression or supports deep therapeutic treatment (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). The idea of crafts, rather, suggests the simple approach of keeping participants doing “busy work,” which connotes a kind of primitive manual manufacture requiring very simple skills to assemble (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Unsurprisingly, then, in the Dallas VA Hospital arts and crafts program, there are no art therapy practices, although many veterans create arts and crafts as a form of self-initiated therapeutic exercise. According to the VA recreational therapy department, the basic aim of this arts and crafts program is to make available opportunities for personal empowerment and self-growth through creative production.

In distinction from formal therapeutic practices, however, there are many positive outcomes for veterans doing arts and crafts. Brookhart (2010) describes how soldiers of both recent and older wars have channeled the anguish and frustrations of their experiences into a cathartic and artistic process. Moreover, the arts and crafts program at the Dallas VA Hospital encourages participation by veterans because it also improves their physical health (Marek, 2001). In my three years of experience as a volunteer, I have observed that many veterans have various mental illnesses and a few have difficulty expressing themselves in words. They feel judged by people outside of the veterans’ community of the hospital, but arts and crafts allow them to express their feelings vividly through visual creation. Oftentimes, their efforts to explain the meanings of their art works become the first step in overcoming personal barriers. Beginning to make positive transformations within themselves, the arts and crafts room allows veterans to learn from each other, developing both cognitive and physical skills in a supportive, community environment.

Introduction to the Study

I cannot imagine how I would have survived the atrocities I faced as a soldier without a supportive environment, and, therefore, I sometimes feel emotional when veterans describe their experiences and needs for an understanding community, empathizing with their pain and distress. Such relations of sympathy and empathy are important parts of *connected knowing* (Stanton, 1996). Connected knowing connotes putting one’s self in another person’s place to understand his or her perspectives and feelings (Clinchy, 1996). Most veterans can remember and describe their military experiences in rich detail, and they also often create art vibrant in color and expression, energized with emotion. Indeed, it was the visual richness of veterans’ art that first drew me to begin volunteering in the arts and crafts room. Viewing veterans’ artworks as a source of connected knowing, this research study aims to illuminate the forms of situated learning and creative production unique to the arts and craft room, exploring how they

underpin veterans' communal efforts to achieve self-empowerment. In particular, the study explores the diversity of individual perspectives offered by a diversity of veterans amid their interactions around arts and crafts.

A well-established principle in art education research is the need to incorporate the diverse perspectives of those who are disenfranchised in society. Prevalent "ways of knowing" express the world view of the dominant culture, and ways of knowing need to be re-classified, re-conceptualized, and re-categorized to account for the multiple perspectives that can enrich research paradigms. As a researcher, I deem it essential, moreover, not simply to consider the voices and perspectives of individual participants, but also how the interactions between individuals are shaped by the social contexts within which individuals come together. In order to address such elements of social interaction, I developed trust with veterans in order to understand how they think, learn, and feel when they make arts and crafts in a community setting. This interest in knowing how diverse individuals narrated their feelings within an arts and crafts environment led me to use collective case study for my research methodology because it allowed me to grasp the narratives through which veterans expressed themselves, supporting my personal connections to their stories.

Such methods allow my research to carefully distinguish between my interpretations of veterans' arts and crafts works and their own. I have often noted that my own military experience shapes my view of veterans' works, which can differ radically from their own views of their meanings. I believe that veterans generally have similar feelings of anger, isolation, depression, and anxiety due to traumatic experiences in the military, but my research approach is designed to guide the reader into the arts and crafts room setting through vivid details of creation and communal interaction that illuminate the particularities of individual expression and unique experience. In this context, the methodology of collective case study gives me the flexibility to interact with subjects in the role of participant-observer. In addition, this methodology is highly appropriate to research conducted within a U.S. government medical facility, since it allows me to become part of a social institution that meets the basic human needs of health, protection, education, and recreation (Best & Kahn, 1986). These elements, in turn, complement the study's employment of care theory, in which I anticipate that the veterans will care about others in the room and help teach each other arts and crafts when needed. At the same time, I remain open to the possibility that the veterans may not always care about others and may shrink from teaching others.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how veterans may or may not perceive a sense of empowerment through various interactions and activities in an arts and crafts environment.

The leading reason this study is important is that in the field of art education, there is a lack of literature that attempts to understand the experiences of groups other than students outside of school settings (Posner, 2000). Comparing analyses of the experience of veterans to the well-established literature on more conventional art education subjects offers the opportunity to examine our beliefs on learning and teaching, exploring how our own past experience as learners can open the doors to understanding others. Furthermore, an essential reason for this study is to examine veterans in the arts and crafts environment to explore whether their experiences were important, meaningful, and empowering, and especially important in this regard are the interactions among veterans. Potential benefits from this study are the exploration and enhancement of research in art education that will help educators gain insights into how veterans use art to empower and teach others what they have learned.

Significance of the Study

Caring and constructing understanding are essential to both discovering similarities and respecting differences in educational self-development settings. Within such frameworks, the research of this study will connect veterans' art with art education by describing how veterans perceive empowerment through community learning, which, in turn can raise awareness within the dominant culture of the alternative world views of veterans, especially as they are communicated through creative production. Knowledge of veteran art has its own life within the military community, but in the field of art education generally, there is little recognition and support for understanding how veterans function in creative environments.

As such, this study holds important implications for future research on pre-service art education, illuminating how art educators in the classroom can teach students about diverse and marginal cultural groups in order to foster greater understanding, respect, and awareness (Clark & Zimmerman, 2000). Such an awareness of different perspectives can encourage individuals to find similarities with one another and respect differences in educational processes that serve self-development and connected knowing (Stanton, 1996). Indeed, through connected knowing, individuals come to see the human who made the art as much as the work itself (Brenson, 1995).

In addition, this study's findings can encourage the study of disenfranchised groups and their modes of participation in art recreation through community-art-based programs, as well as promote volunteer work with veterans' arts and crafts programs. Although it can be difficult for an outsider to establish herself within veteran communities, collaborating with veterans can give art educators, pre-service students, and others a sense of responsibility and help them construct deeper insights about veterans by listening to their stories and accepting their feelings. Listening outside of the classroom through the processes of creating, talking about,

and reflecting upon veterans' arts and crafts. to veterans' stories through arts and crafts in order to understand their perspectives and experiences can also expand our conceptions of art education while dispelling negative stereotypes. As such, interchanges among interested individuals and the veteran community can promote lifelong learning

This study also has the potential to encourage participants to construct new understandings about their lives, themselves, and others (McTaggart, 1997). The multiple realities veterans describe elucidate the unique ways humans can learn and connect through various exchanges and situations. Each veteran's voice shows a desire to speak and invites the reader to explore and interpret the ways in which arts, crafts, and community convey the variety and depth of veterans' experiences. Such reciprocity through conversation can help other individuals gain cross-cultural connections and build relationships through the process of creating, talking about, and reflecting upon veterans' art. As individuals question themselves about their perspectives, lived experiences, and connections to others through arts and crafts, such self-examination will help facilitate new forms of connected knowledge. Overall, then, this research can be significant for teaching pre-service art education students and educators to learn how different groups of people perceive empowerment, create community, and gain the sense of self-empowerment within creative environments. A majority of veterans do not have any experiences making art and these crafts allowed them to gain new experiences in expressing themselves.

From my own experience, being inside the arts and crafts room where creativity is supported through interactive learning, and has helped me better understand myself and gain control of over my life. It is my hypothesis that other veterans will likewise gain a sense of empowerment if they are successful in a creative activity and share their experiences with others within a supportive environment.

The Learning Experience

Many learning experiences take place during and after the process of creative activities. In a way, it's similar to art therapy; the individual engages in and makes meaning from the art making in order to enhance the physical, mental and emotional state of his or her well-being (Lark, 2001). The American Art Therapy Association describes the creative process as a way to develop self-expression and help the individual reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness and develop interpersonal skills. (2009) Many veterans share the experiences of deep emotional scars that affect the quality of their everyday lives (Tick, 2005).

To further understand the impact of art and how it helps the therapeutic progress, Kakas (2001) wrote that viewing art can also have a therapeutic healing power. Kakas described community arts in an urban setting, where crowds of people would visit an artist's rock garden

listening to the artist's stories while marveling at his creations. Not only is art therapeutic for the artist, but the artist is motivated to communicate ideas, beliefs and values to others about his or her work. Communicating ideas through creative activities helped the veterans make sense of their worlds by piecing together pictures and stories from a blizzard of memory and sensation (Orland, 2006). Understanding oneself also reminds us that coming amid the turbulence of life bring us to the realization that making art does matter, and it is the way we manifest being human. When veterans tried to make sense of their world by creating objects that symbolized how they felt inside, they gained insight within themselves to help them make positive changes in their lives.

Additionally, learning took place through the collaboration of veterans teaching other veterans skills on how to assemble or create art. The veterans participated as practitioners in this community. Many of these veterans started as learners and acquired the knowledge and skills to make arts and crafts. Then, they helped newcomers who visited the arts and craft room and taught them techniques in art production as part of the socio-cultural practices of this veteran community. Through this interchanges between veterans promoted the empowerment of personal growth and learning of many veterans.

Stout (1999) described the community as having the capacity to draw people together through art; that when individuals understand the interdependence of self and other, then they will begin to see the truth in the assertion that knowledge comes only through community, and they will begin the process of connected knowing. Being a part of the community draws the human experience together. In the community, we come to see the human who made the art as much as we see the work itself (Brenson, 1995).

Community Arts

I see veteran art as a sub-category of *community arts* (Agostinone-Wilson, 2001). The concept of discourse of using community art comes from my belief that people make art to address social changes. *Social reconstructivism* influenced this research because creative production showed the energy and depth of veterans and allowed their voices and concerns of feeling uncared for to be felt across by others who weren't from the veteran community (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Even though the knowledge of their art is evolving and emerging through the military community, there is not enough recognition and support to understand veterans and their creative environments in general art education. Clark and Zimmerman (2000) suggest that involving and building support from a wide base of community members enrich the understanding of the arts into the curricula.

Educating students to become actively involved in community arts with veterans leads to personal empowerment and social awareness. Art educators and students can teach and reach

out to veteran communities who generally aren't recognized or thought of as artistic or creative. Congdon (2006) describes community as a representation both innovative and traditional which binds people together. Additionally, Keys & Morris (2001) explained that community art establishes connections between new audience where local resources are utilized and partnerships are formed. Resources include students, faculty, arts organizations and other community members to create ownership, empowerment and responsibility among diverse individuals and can help the progression of art education (Keys & Morris, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from post-modern feminist theory, narrative inquiry, and care theory. These theories come from the idea that nurturing human empathy, compassion, and the need to help others in various learning environments can help individuals gain empowerment. Post-Modern Feminist Theory: it is through feminist theory that this study's research is focused on the interactions among members of disenfranchised groups, particularly in the ways that the processes and products of creative activity bring empowerment:

A feminist perspective argues that without empathetic, interpersonal relationships, researchers will be unable to gain insight into the meaning people give to their lives . . . Through collaborative inquiry and reflexive knowledge building, researchers can deconstruct hierarchical relationships and produce research that is useful and meaningful to participants and the larger society. (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.148)

Gaining a sense of purpose in one's life links the notion of empowerment closely to the notion of community (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The connotation of 'power of' rather than 'power over' firmly situates the individual inside a homogenous grouping which is the community. In correlation to feminist theories, feminists advocate more participatory, reflexive approaches to constructing knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). The general definition of post-modern feminist theory stems from the fact that postmodernism replaces the holistic world view of any group and emphasizes constructive learning through shifting language and an emphasis on identities (Maher & Tetreault, 1996). In addition, post-modern feminist theory recognizes differences and insists on opportunity for all individuals to contribute their perspectives and insights regardless of race, social status, religion, orientation, or gender, while resisting any one world view's claims to hold the one "truth" (Maher & Tetreault, 1996).

Post-modern feminists begin with ideas about language and systems of thought, and that focus is congruent with the pursuit of empowerment for oppressed groups through the pursuit of social justice (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.11). The post-modern approach shifts away from the individual as the *only* source of our knowledge, exploring individual's relationships with others

in particular settings (Maher & Tetreault, 1996). Post-modern feminist theory encourages participants to tell and interpret their own lives and stories and use this as the center of narrative inquiry for the process of constructing knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

Consequently, an important imperative of post-modern feminist theory is to promote social change by focusing on the lives and experiences of those who are often disregarded in public discourse such as veterans (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). A feminist perspective can bring out new ways of knowing that can challenge and shape social policy and individuals' lives (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). In such a context, this study employs post-modern feminist theory to chart the process of telling stories by disenfranchised individuals to "reflect and find ways to overcome barriers of differences and oppression in their community" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.146). As such, it uses post-modern feminist research to focus on power and how knowledge is built through lived experience and communicated through social interactions and visual artifacts (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). In addition, constructing knowledge is a process of continual change. An example is reflexive knowledge, which occurs through the sharing of dialogue with veterans:

Reflexive knowledge building requires interrogation of social biographies and historical context, examination of the intersection of privilege and power, and the de-centering of knowledge claims around interpretation and representation. Listening, interacting, sharing, and translating are some of the techniques feminists have developed to foster greater connectedness, understanding, and self-empowerment. (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.148) Interaction between individuals can shape and structure their daily existence through constructive dialogue, and empowerment of the oppressed is a process that breaks the boundaries between the individual and the communal (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Moreover, empowerment through community breaks the boundaries between the public and the private domain, connecting the personal to the social. In addition, empowerment can be transformative when there is a shift in the distribution of social power, since "offering (under-represented) groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering," but "revealing new ways of knowing that allow (these) groups to define their own reality has, however, far greater implications" (Yuval-Davis, N.,1997, p.78). Empowerment is also a process by which oppressed people can gain control over their lives through increased involvement in the community and can affect them and others directly (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In addition, such forms of conversation and dialogue powerfully support individual learning (Entwistle & Hounsell, 1975).

Narrative Inquiry

The importance of learning from others through dialogue and personal stories is a central tenet of *narrative inquiry* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories are rich in historical, psychological, and human perspectives, which are universal, as all humans have stories to share in order to construct knowledge and self-development (Stake, 1995). Nair (2003) describes storytelling as a community bonding that allows the teller to gain control of the moment and ensure understanding of his or her narrative. The reflexive relationship of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories is, then, at the heart of the construction of narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is essential to note that narrative does not reflect “the” reality, but with the help of the reader, narratives can create a version of reality (Ely, 2007). Participants’ realities or life stories examine how people make sense of the world and how they interpret their realities. Narrative inquiries are embodiments of lived stories that the researcher and participant share during conversation (Clandinin, 2000).

The elements of a life story are “told in parts, chronologically or thematically and stand out as key parts to a life but are also able to be seen as parts that fit together as a whole” (Atkinson, 2007, p.238). Personal narratives are constructed and reconstructed through the representation of an entire life, illuminating how divergent experiences ultimately connect one stage of life to another (Atkinson, 2007). Connecting such narratives in a personal framework can bring new perspectives and meanings to one’s life (Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 2007).

Applying such perspectives to post-modern feminist theories allows us to view research interviews through multiple lenses, comprehending contexts, moments, active listening, and language in a process designed to “highlight both the individuality and complexity of a life” (p.154) in the composition of a personal experience narrative. Within such a framework, this study stresses the importance of studying narratives that come from marginalized groups or individuals such as veterans, who are underrepresented in research studies, in order to “balance out the databases that have been relied on for so long in generating theory” (p.229-230). For example, Pavlish (2007) describes how narrative inquiry gives insight into human experiences, each story revealing important aspects of individual and communal lives. In an article about refugee women and men in a Rwanda camp, her research exposes the identities, memories, and significant events in their past and present lives. Here, “truth” is not truth according to positivist social science, but the “truth” of the interpretation and meaning derived from lived realities and perceptions.

In a research context, such narrative meanings can develop through voices that arise from both the researcher and participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as the researcher writes the participant’s storied experiences in ways that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience’s understandings. In consequence, the collection and analysis of stories, along with the

interpretation of narrative, communicates divergent experiences and builds relationships between research participants, researchers, and readers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Such a process is described by Josselson (2007), who notes that the greater degree of rapport and trust established, the more participants reveal personal information. Moreover, such participants have a greater degree of faith in the researcher to treat the information with respect and compassion. Amid the building of such relationships, the foremost ethical imperative of the researcher is to protect the privacy and dignity of the participant. Participants may tell experiences by which they are ashamed or intimidated, and their willingness to share them can depend on their reading of the researcher's emotional response.

For example, in a previous pilot study, one veteran participant trusted me but did not share much personal information with me. She stated to me that certain incidents were in the past, so there was no need to remember them. In response, I nevertheless tried to connect the parts of her life she did not talk about to those she did. Such a process addresses what Ely (2007) describes as the "unsayable" in narrative psychology and narrative inquiry (p.13). Ely (2007) emphasizes that for researchers, silence is imperative, paradoxically allowing readers to hear peoples' voices, making sense of narratives rather than being told what the researcher thinks. Such a technique requires listening to what participants say consciously and unconsciously (Rogers, 2007). Listening is very important because sometimes during interviews, people can reveal the unconscious in their speech. Listening to the unconscious is an alternative way to explore human subjectivity, language, and the formation of the subject (Rogers, 2007).

On the other hand, participants may need someone to listen to them with sincere interest and will welcome the interview (Atkinson, 2007). A story can be creative or imaginative but that does not make it fictional or untruthful, as long as it retains the voice of the storyteller (Atkinson, 2007). It is the reality of the participant who tells the story and his or her "insider's viewpoint on the life being lived" (p.239). Participants who invent parts of their stories may feel the need to be creative, but what matters is that the life story is deemed "trustworthy" more than "true" (Atkinson, 2007).

Chronicling the life stories of others can lead to social inquiry (Daniel, 2003). For example, Michel (2004) describes veteran artists as those who convey a sense of history in their art, along with narrative. Veteran artists want others who view their work to see what they saw from their lived experiences along with their emotional reflections through their art (Michel, 2004). Through such a process, veterans can gain a sense of empowerment by sharing their experiences.

Care Theory

In order for a sense of empowerment to emerge, there has to be the component of caring during teaching and learning. Care theory recognizes that individuals have different levels of need for help to achieve adequate levels of functioning in particular circumstances (Engster, 2007). The definition of caring in general means to be involved meeting the basic needs of individuals, developing their capabilities, and helping them to survive and function (Engster, 2007). Noddings (2003) describes *caring* as an essentially feminine experience that provides a motivation for humans to be moral, enhancing the ideal of ourselves as the “one-caring” (p.5). To act as the *one-caring* is to act for another person (the “cared-for”) and to protect or enhance the welfare of the other (Noddings, 2003). An example is Noddings’ personal account of her caring experience: “My motive energy flows toward the other person . . . I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other” (p.33).

In addition, the process of providing care and the practice of kindness also helps individuals alleviate pain and suffering (Watson, 2009). The duty to care for others is based on the ethical demand to value human resources and life purposes, and to bring meaning to oneself and others (Watson, 2009). Caring helps others meet their biological needs in an attentive, responsive, and respectful manner that cultivates practices of kindness (Watson, 2007). It does not mean providing goods or services to individuals according to what others think they need, but attending and responding to individual needs in respectful ways. Individuals regularly acknowledge that the caring relationships they develop with others are the most fulfilling aspects of their lives (Engster, 2007). It is empathetic and sympathetic listening towards an individual that will allow someone to feel another can understand him or her without wanting to analyze or make judgments (Rogers, 1975). It is important to listen to someone in order to foster greater connectedness and understanding, and to give another a sense of empowerment.

Service to others through the act of caring is important for influencing positive motivation and encouraging inquisitive behavior in learning art (Phillips, 2003). In an art classroom, when teachers show care and value their students’ learning, the students see how learning within a caring environment can enrich their lives (Phillips, 2003). Caring for others when teaching art allows those who are cared for to realize greater potential inside themselves (Phillips, 2003). Trust is developed when care is shown in a positive learning environment (Kelehear & Heid, 2002). In these ways, a learner also develops a healthy self-image that can come from the support and care of the teacher (Kelehear & Heid, 2002). Nurturing empathy, compassion, and care within an arts environment may allow learners to gain a sense of power and confidence and develop a generalized feeling of self-efficacy (Kelehear & Heid, 2002).

Additionally, the obligation to care helps develop the sense of sympathy and compassion for others. This, in turn, helps an individual see the suffering of others as a matter of concern affecting his or her sense as a moral person (Watson, 2009). Nevertheless, those who do not care for themselves may in the long term be less able or willing to care for others (Engster, 2007). The social consequences of the lack of caring can result in individuals finding difficulty in producing work, suffering depression and anxiety, and experiencing a number of personal and health problems (Watson, 2009).

Finally, supporting institutions and policies that directly help individuals to meet their needs—providing caregivers resources, for example—is a collective way of caring (Engster, 2007). This form of caring is less personal but still fits the definition of caring because the direct aim of the activity remains meeting the needs and fostering the capabilities of others. This includes providing community-based programs and public educational programs.

Case Studies

When Chuck came into the arts and crafts room, people he did not know immediately trusted him and told him their hardships and stories. For Chuck, the feeling of others trusting him was empowering. Chuck commented that the other veterans told him stories that they would never tell a civilian and that they accepted him as a friend. Yet, there are things he will not tell them. Each time I observed Chuck inside the room, he would stay there for hours until he left for his doctor's appointments. The feeling of empowerment for him was temporary, lasting only for the time he spent inside the arts and crafts room. Chuck told me that:

I come in down and depressed but I feel good about myself when I am in there but it only lasts a few minutes after I leave because I don't have the people to talk to when I leave the room. (Personal communication April 12, 2011)

Chuck trusted me over the months I came into the arts and crafts room and interestingly enough, my interactions with Chuck influenced his choice of religion in some way. He asked me what my religion was and I told him that I was a Christian. Over the next several months for some reason he changed his religion from Satanism to Christianity. I felt that my dealings with Chuck influenced him because I showed him empathy and care. I felt that although Chuck did not participate in making any arts and crafts, he wanted to feel cared for and wanted a sense of belonging with other veterans. For him, the positive and supportive social interaction was important for his perceived sense of empowerment.

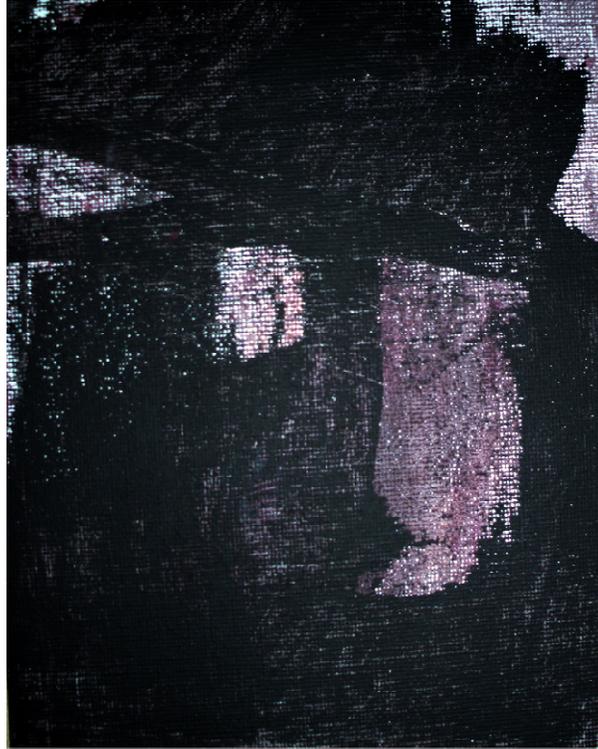


FIGURE 1. PAINTING BY "CHUCK" DESCRIBING THE HOUSE WHERE HE CLAIMS HE WAS RAPED REPEATEDLY BY HIS GRANDFATHER.



FIGURE 2. PAINTING BY "CHUCK" DESCRIBING THE 'HELL' HE LIVES IN ON A DAILY BASIS. HE PAINTS AN "IN" AND "OUT" DOOR. THE "OUT" DOOR IS MAKING ARTWORK TO ESCAPE HIS INNER TURMOIL.

Alexander started painting twenty-five years ago when he saw an artist on television paint. He watched him for a while and said, "Hey, I can do that," so Alexander bought a kit and started painting. He began copying the style of the artist on TV, but after a while Alexander tired of copying, feeling he lacked is own style, identity, or expression in art. Alexander does not like abstract art and has adopted wildlife and landscape as his own personal subject matter because he loves animals, especially cats. To learn techniques, Alexander watched DVDs, read books, and looked at photographs to make his wildlife paintings. When he finished a painting, he told me, he felt satisfied and contented because he was able to produce an art work. Alexander aspires to paint realistically. The more realistic a painting looks, the more it builds his self-esteem, but if it fails his expectations, he throws it away or re-paints it.

On one occasion, Alexander sold a painting for fifty cents to another veteran in the room. He told me that she offered to pay him, but he said that he would have given it to her. It wasn't about the price, but rather that someone appreciated and respected his work, which made him feel good. Currently, Alexander is consistent in creating paintings, and he makes one or two paintings a month, and it takes him about three-to-four hours to complete one. Favoring realism over abstraction, he told me that he did not like what he saw in art museums. He continues instead to go to the arts and crafts room because his motivation to go to there is the interaction and support he experiences with other veterans.



FIGURE 3. OIL PAINTING BY "ALEXANDER."



FIGURE 4. OIL PAINTING BY "ALEXANDER."

Marine did a great deal of crafts before and after the military because, he told me, he has American Indian blood and is familiar with many of his culture's art traditions, and he would watch his grandfather and grandmother on the reservation make arts and crafts. The crafts he preferred to make were all beadwork. Marine told me that he starting doing beadwork when he was a young child around age four and made Indian headdresses, dream catchers, and portraits of lions, wolves, and "Our Lady of Guadalupe" because his family made arts and crafts. Marine also does bead portraits of his grandchildren. He told me that he chose this medium because beads relax his mind and keep him from having relapses, and beadwork also keeps him from thinking about what he did in Vietnam. He told me that he killed people in Vietnam and was haunted by that. He said that making craft beadwork, "relaxes me, keeps me sane, keeps me from doing things that I don't wanna do. Here at the arts and crafts room I met a lot of good friends. They are all positive and they are never negative in what they do except when you get some crazy guy that think that they know everything but they don't know what is going on. If some of these veterans would walk as many miles as I have walked, they would understand where a lot of things been coming from."

He told me that he preferred crafts over paintings because he felt that there was no imagination or concentration in painting like there is in beads. He explained to me that:

With beads, you have to have more patience because you have to know where those colors go. It's like painting, but with painting it doesn't really relax me

because I have no sense of combining colors. (Personal communication March 2, 2011)

In February 2011, Marine won first place for the crafts category at the Veteran's Arts and Crafts Show in Dallas, Texas. He entered a tiger and a wolf made from over three thousand beads. He told me that if he cannot sleep it will take him a week and a half to make a craft from beads, but sometimes it will take him two months. From my months of observing Marine, he was very relaxed when he made craft kits. Although he was generally very quiet in the room, he told me several times that saw "ghosts" in the arts and crafts room. He told me that he thought that these ghosts were the people that he killed in Vietnam. Marine described his experience:

Some have faces and some don't. Some are black shadows. Others have the faces of those people I killed, men and women. One was a male who looked angry at me. I see them by the window, sometimes by the table. I see them at home. I remember being inside a tunnel and shooting at them. They scurry like ants through the holes of the tunnel." (Personal communication March 2, 2011)



FIGURE 5. BEADWORK BY "MARINE."



FIGURE 6. BEADWORK BY "MARINE."

Conclusion

During the last four years of volunteering in the arts and crafts room, I have learned that the learning experience is a shared experience. Veterans like me who shared in the process of creative activities and learned and taught others developed a sense of self-empowerment.

The importance of this research will fill in some gaps for connecting veterans' art with art education by teaching pre-service students about how different groups of people empower themselves through interaction, production and collaboration inside the creative arts environment at the hospital. Educators who challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information. This is one of the most valuable skills a teacher can acquire (Watkins, 2003, p.43).

This study has the potential to encourage responsibility to those who participate in making their own conditions in life so that they may construct understanding about themselves and others (McTaggart, 1997). Constructing understanding is important to find similarities within one another and respect differences in the overall learning of self-development. As of August 2012, the Veterans Arts and Crafts room was disbanded and replaced with a pool table. Due to budget cuts the veterans currently do not have an expressive outlet to do arts and crafts. Without this place, the veterans will lose the value of learning art education. As Marine pointed out:

We are a tight unit and we always stay together. In here, it's like a small brotherhood. Everyone just sits around and talk about what's going on. Sometimes we get personal but for me personal life should be kept to yourself and not shared with anyone else. I can go from a good guy to a bad guy in a matter of minutes. Basically everyone that comes here is positive because they want to do something to help their mind to help them forget what's going on and do arts and crafts for therapeutic reasons . . . I am the type of guy that don't really talk a whole lot. I tell him to look and listen. I learned that listening from other vets about what's going on for when they need help and when they don't need help. Listening is probably the best thing because I can just sit back and just see what's going on with these vets. (Personal communication March 2, 2011)

This empowerment can be supported through the collaboration of educators, students, and general communities who can learn about different communities such as veterans and what happens in their creative environment by extending their channels of art education, compassion, empathy and understanding.

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