CO-CREATION WITH YOUTH: TEACHING ARTISTRY AND ART OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Hallie Morrison

Abstract
This article shares my process and reflection as a teaching artist on a specific project with the Chicago Opera Theater (COT). An extension of my personal and professional practices that aims to provide larger painting experiences for students than they are normally provided, this project takes place in Chicago public schools through a model of Arts Partnership in which COT brings in multidisciplinary arts education. Beyond being an educational program, this school-based artistic co-creation resulted in opportunities for professional learning, intracultural bonding, and empowering moments for youth. This article includes images of the art teaching process, arts integration program tools, and closing teaching artist reflections on the project that include a visual and poetic arts-based response.

Bio
Hallie Morrison is a multidisciplinary teaching artist currently practicing in Chicago, Illinois, USA. She is an Art Director for Art Relief International, an art outreach non-profit effort currently on pause after 10 years of bringing art education to at-risk populations in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Her dedication to facilitating healing social impact has led her to work in various non-profit centers and create murals and social projects in Thailand, Ireland, and the Chicagoland area. To view her art portfolio and arts-based research on-line visit: halliemorrison.myportfolio.com.

After six years as a teaching artist and artistic director for art outreach programs in schools, it finally clicks: large-scale art projects for youth groups are critical for their personal, communal, and educational development. At a glance, these projects have empowered youth by highlighting their existing creative capacities as facets of themselves that can be honed for their future personal and career pathways. I have seen these projects serve as in-classroom arts-based professional learning for educators and school administrators, in addition to creating bonds within classroom culture (between students and between the teachers and their students.) This article is an overview of one teaching artist experience I recently had as an example of how an artist can work within a school setting to support and expand students’ and teachers’ experiences with art as a transformative part of a curriculum that can augment students’ understanding of relationship building and of following a life path based on dedication and passion.

In writing this article, I intend to share how a regular arts practice can significantly prepare one with the mental and emotional skillset to become an active citizen in society by being able to consistently find inspiration in the mundane, light in the dark, and motivation throughout all of life's obstacles. This article exposes insights from my ongoing creative praxis of curiously inquiring into all aspects of my own life, and how that practice has afforded me the adaptability and problem-solving skills to prosper whilst finding meaningful community and career stability.
As schools have been striving during the Coronavirus pandemic to provide sufficient virtual education and safely get their students back to school soon, this article aims to share the benefits of youth art projects, in general, in hopes that these programs will be prioritized when children return to school. I acknowledge that many arts organizations and small businesses have folded during the pandemic, and a wealth of experience and knowledge needs to urgently be generated in education spaces for fear of loss. Recovering programs such as “Opera For All” and instilling more creative resources and practices for youth needs to be revisited and spotlighted—this is the time for reversing the historical lack of support and funding for arts programming in American public schools.

In Chicago, public schools sign up for the “Opera For All” (OFA) program year after year because there are few options for their students within the field of arts education, due to long-standing, political and financial reasons. This program is provided by the Chicago Opera Theater (COT) and aims to meet the needs of public schools without theater, music, dance, and visual arts programming: where arts education is otherwise left to out-of-school programming or additional guardian/teacher responsibility—that may not be realistic nor accessible to supplement a student’s formal education. Through OFA, each classroom learns the “stages of creating, producing, and performing their own musical shows. In addition to script writing, composing, painting, dancing, and performing, students are exposed to an opera performance and a field trip each year” (Opera For All, n.d.). This program is meant to serve students who “normally wouldn’t have access [to the arts] in an everyday classroom situation,” specifically in schools that do not offer arts programming at all, or only provide a few disciplines from the visual arts (Opera For All, YouTube). From an art outreach perspective, programs like this go directly to the students—and operate independently through non-profit alternative education organizations that obtain their own funding. Thus, the project plays an important role within the larger field of art education for its auxiliary approach to arts teaching and learning that is not currently available to certain public schools.

As a Guest Teaching Artist (GTA) of Scenic Backdrops with the Chicago Opera Theater, I collaborated with twenty-four 2nd-7th grade Chicago public school classrooms to create original scenic backdrops for each class’s student-produced and performed opera production. Usually, focusing on the scenic element of the opera productions, I collaborate with youth and their educators to design and facilitate the creation of painted backdrops. These works are usually 6x9 feet in size to allow average class sizes of 25+ students to gather around, learn, and co-create.

Each class’s opera is influenced by the yearly OFA program theme in conjunction with the COT’s main-stage production. This year’s theme was generally framed around “justice” and “freedom,” as the COT performed Freedom Ride, its own commission about Sylvie Davenport who is “forced to choose between her academic future and the future of the nation in a story that highlights how far we’ve come and how far we still have left to go” (Shore, 2020, n.p.).

The Teaching Artist Process

Before I entered each classroom, students worked with their year-round opera Teaching Artist. This educator takes each class through an introduction to opera history, music composition, lyric writing, script writing, prop and costume design, and more. The theme of this year’s program, “justice” and “freedom,” was explored with students at the beginning of the school year through brainstorming and questioning facilitated by each Teaching Artist. After these initial brainstorming sessions, each classroom took a scheduled field trip to the Chicago History Museum where they perused exhibits about national, international, and Chicago-based freedom move-
ments. They visited the exhibition, *Facing Freedom in America*, which showed them historic examples of how communities have fought for and gained rights, and how these movements may continue today. While in the exhibit, the TAs asked students about the concept of freedom and if anything from the exhibit influenced their understanding of freedom. After the experience of the field trip, the TAs had each classroom brainstorm together, decide upon, and individually sketch an environment for a central conflict around which their opera plots and characters could develop.

At this point in the opera program, students brainstormed and sketched their visions for their scenic backdrops, given their developing class conversations about their opera’s plot, conflict, and freedom fight in their stories. Facilitated by their opera Teaching Artists, students drew out their ideas, including clear symbols, words, and images to visually express their environment. Before meeting the students, I received their sketches and ideas of what they envisioned their backdrop to look like. The drawings that I received were based on each class’s creative consensus—given their still-evolving storyline (after understanding basic story structure) and their understanding of the importance of their story’s environment. Once all of the student sketches were submitted to me as the GTA, I jumped into each classroom’s creative progress by compiling and representing everyone’s ideas into one, final background design (per classroom.) I sifted through great creativity from students, and their clever visual cues that they imbued into their sketches, and ultimately, I prepared one unifying design for each classroom by the time of our first session together.

Connecting with the idea of a relatable conflict, one classroom was possibly influenced by the *Facing Freedom in America* exhibit and the historic school boycotts that the exhibition covered. This fourth-grade class of special needs students was inspired to create an opera with a conflict about the student-teacher dynamic. During my first session with this classroom, I introduced myself and asked them about the conflict in their plot, to which I gathered this synopsis:

A central student in the opera is constantly misjudged by their teacher and blamed for things they did not do. This makes the student feel unheard, unseen, desperate, and lost. The student needs to find a way to speak up to communicate this experience with their peers first—to gain a sense of belonging—then, correct their image and reclaim justice by their teacher, with the help of their peers.

Given this conflict focus, the entire class had submitted intriguing sketches for their scenic backdrops—images of never-ending school hallways, clocks, staircases with confusing directions, and repetitive classroom items, like rows of desks and meticulously detailed tiles of the classroom ceilings and floors.

For all of the classrooms, this year’s backdrops needed to set the scene for many unique situations that involved speaking up for ourselves and fighting for justice. Given the anti-racism movements taking place in Chicago, and all over the world, I wish that these students could respond again to the theme of justice and freedom in order learn and express from this critical time in current events. Though, students came up with conflicts involving injustice, such as: fruit friends who can no longer live in peace in the same fruit bowl because of fruit-based racism; underwater employees protesting the antics of their boss at “Sea Store” for un-ethical treatment; black cats protesting cultural prejudices that cause their low adoption rates at Los Angeles pet center “All Fur One”; and more.
After compiling each student’s sketch into one class design, I gridded, drew, outlined, and painted a small composite sketch to present to students in their first session with me. This year I added another teaching element, in which I taught students about the design and gridding process that I use to translate small-scale sketches to large-scale surfaces. Last year, I stressed the need for an additional session in which GTA’s could show students the design and drawing steps, so as to democratize the preliminary work that an artist would typically do alone, and make the overall project much more accessible for novices. This was to further prevent the paint-by-numbers experience that students historically received, when the GTA produced an already drawn and outlined canvas for each class.

**The First Session: Drawing and Grid-Making**

In the first one-hour session, I introduced myself as an artist and muralist, and we had a quick conversation about large-scale paintings and where and why we see them: like murals in our neighborhoods. I explained to students that I had been given their individual sketches and created a composite from all of their ideas, so as to represent everyone equally. This is where the opera Teaching Artists, classroom teachers, and I realized that
exposing this process to the students was more valuable than I had initially proposed; in that moment, I was facilitating a Language Arts lesson explaining what “composite” means and asking students for words with similar roots. Across 2\textsuperscript{nd}-7\textsuperscript{th} grade, students anticipated my direction when asking for words like composite, defining for me the words “combine, compile, compose.” Classroom teachers were able to jump in and come up to the white board and instruct and remind students of past lessons and exercises that involved these words and their meanings. From here, I challenged all students to look further into what I had prepared for them. Every time I introduced a class to their design, I led a 5-7 minutes conversation (depending on the grade) about the elements and principles of Art and tied them back to the English Language Arts.

We also encountered Mathematics in Art when I pointed out that my sketch had a grid over it. So, I facilitated a conversation about grids and asked if anyone had played any games that involved coordinates on grids (like Battleship.) I briefly explained and quizzed students on “rows and columns” and how to locate coordinates using alphabet guides for rows and numbers for columns. After the entire class understood the grid system and that the squares of the grid were 1x1 inch, so as to correlate with the 1x1 foot ratio of our 6x9 feet canvas, I instructed students to copy my composite sketch into the blank grid on a worksheet. I created these grid worksheets for each student with their own class’s composite sketch. Students in some classes were encouraged to work in partners, and some students with special needs worked with their aids. Most students, depending on the grade and classroom, completed the worksheet on their own.

![Fig. 2 and 3. Completed worksheets from 4th and 3rd graders, with the original artist sketches on the bottom, February 2020. H. Morrison.](image)

I was fortunate in that students demonstrated innate abilities in observation, basic drawing, and fine motor skills. Throughout the activity, students’ abilities expanded to include comparison and spatial awareness—after first thinking that larger-seeming features in the sketch actually took up larger sections of the grid, for example.
Students also quickly implemented resourceful tips for drawing straighter lines with the use of local materials; using the straight edge of another sheet of paper, pencil, or folder to help them achieve angular features, like buildings, or other geometric parts of the drawing.

While students worked on their sheets, I simultaneously prepared the canvas by laying it down and plotting out the grid according to the 1x1 foot ratio we had discussed. With a tape measurer and pencil, I gridded each canvas in the same time students completed their worksheets. Then, we all gathered around the canvas and I demonstrated how to sketch and follow the gridded composite sketch.

Following the grid from left to right, row by row, I started in “A1” and moved to “A2” and showed students how to directly translate the sketch, minding the increase in scale. Students had a chance to sketch directly onto the canvas with a tool that I occasionally use to help me reach across the large canvas (a wooden dowel with a pencil taped to the end) Students could see the sketched drawing grow on the canvas, and we defined the technique of sketching: light lines that are drawn as guides for the final design. We usually ended the first hour together at this point, and looked forward to outlining the sketch more permanently with markers in the next session.

Scaffolding this technique for students through conversation, the worksheet, and participation on the large scale was something I have honed in my prior years teaching in this program, and it worked well with each student. Students witnessed something “come to life” and felt the excitement and fun that the start of a shared project always promises. Teachers in the classroom enjoyed seeing how Math and other subjects tie into Art, and how this project inherently satisfies their teaching requirements. They could easily see how, looking at the Illinois Learning Standards for Visual Arts, Mathematics, and English Language Arts, teachers could easily see that this painting project would touch upon, if not satisfy, specific standards—and could intentionally be expanded upon to reach even more.

The Second and Third Sessions: Painting

Anxious to roll up our sleeves, the second and third sessions revealed open-mindedness and much appreciation for painting in the students. We revisited my composite sketch, reminded ourselves of the team vision, and finished sketching or outlining (with marker) any part of the drawing that had not been finalized. Every class was split up into two groups, in order to fit 10-12 students around the canvas at a time. Whilst waiting their turn, the group in the classroom worked on t-shirt designs for an OFA program-wide design competition.

Before painting, we went through three necessary painting pointers. Firstly, when dipping into containers of professional-grade, permanent, acrylic paint, it is important to wipe off the brush multiple times against the edge.
of the container before approaching the canvas. This is to prevent dripping onto the canvas (or yourself) and to preserve paint supply. This pointer became a behavioral management device throughout the work-time, to remind students to slow down, wipe the brush, breathe, and practice consideration for those around them. This project facilitated a considerateness that apparently some students had been waiting for—chiming in and endorsing caution whilst working so closely together. These student responses made this project experience seem necessary for community-building and interpersonal skill building. Physical boundaries and respect were consistent reminders to be instilled in those younger in years.

Secondly, when working on such a large scale (also considering the size of students), it is important to paint from the middle of the canvas and work outwards, so as not to paint yourself into a corner, prevent yourself or others from reaching a section of the canvas, or waste time waiting for barriers of wet paint to dry. Thirdly, always initiate a new section of the painting by starting right at the marker-lined border of that area, and then work your way outwards.

On one side of the spectrum: second graders could not contain themselves once they approached the canvas. On the other side: seventh graders were calm but curious. Regardless of their grade or developmental level, every class brought wonder and all of their sensibilities to the work. Students with physical limitations were part of the experience, innovating hand tools to grasp the paint brush with the help of their aides. At one school, the entire 3rd grade class hoisted up the canvas so that a student in a wheelchair could kickstart the painting process.

The actual moments of painting were a whirlwind of delegating tasks to pairs and groups of students based on the sections of canvas they could reach and tackle—and by what colors were mixed and available. In moments when students did not have a painting task, they were invited to practice color mixing and received an introductory
lesson on color theory. Some students already knew about complementary colors and could clue their peers as to what colors to mix next. Ultimately, everyone had a hand in the mixing of paint, and some students even preferred it to the painting, because they found the swirling and mixing of the colors to be fascinating or soothing.

Student and Teacher Feedback

As a teaching artist, I was validated by both the students and the teachers and I evolved as an artist myself. The painting days were the students’ favorite OFA days out of the year. Some students started out saying that choreography days were their favorite, and ended up changing their minds in favor of the painting days for the novelty of the activity and for the chance to work alongside friends.

While instructing how to mix paint with one 3rd grade male, I advised them to scrape the bottoms and sides of the bowl for unmixed paint and I showed them how to angle the brush into the curves of the bowl. This demonstration gained a: “Wow, you’re a real artist,” and the student mimicked my motions exactly, demonstrating their ability to also become a real artist. Another student (3rd grade, male, with special needs) rushed up to me at the start of each session and told me about the first moments in which they felt like an artist, and the art they made. Another male student (3rd grade), told me that in between our sessions they started to paint more at home and wanted me to know that he has always felt like an artist. From the same classroom, another male student greeted me at the start of a session with a hand-cut paper snowflake and very seriously asked, “Would you like one of my snowflakes?” which I accepted with gratitude, knowing myself how I feel when someone appreciates the art that I make.

Two female students (3rd and 4th grade) told me that they both had painted before with their fathers. One father painted houses for work, and that student was very confident with holding and maneuvering the brush. The other student told me that her father has a space for recreational painting in their garage, and that he lets her work on detailed sections of his paintings. I leveraged this information to entrust her with lettering in the backdrop that needed to be legible at a distance by the audience. This student, usually quiet, spoke up excitedly when she had previous knowledge or experience to share regarding painting and what brush or color might be best for each section. So, I harnessed this energy and asked her to help her neighbors and work with others more, rather than allowing her to continue working as singularly as she usually would. This social nudge could have been especially successful because of my situation as a guest in the existing class culture, in that I did not repeat or perpetuate existing situational/social barriers that class may have already unintentionally cultivated.

As for the teachers, some were particularly supportive, one spoke very highly of artists, and wanted their students to understand that I created the composite artwork based on their original ideas and to make everyone feel included. The same teacher wanted to break the illusion of the artwork itself and explain that it did not just appear magically, but that it is a product of one's imagination, skill, and research; that making art takes dedication, practice, and self-identification as an artist to make artwork come to fruition. I found it to be important for teachers to be present during the introductory session, in which I explained “composite sketch” and the mathematical side of gridding an artwork, so that they could connect to the many potential arts integration ideas embedded in this project and extract from it some tangible project plans for their future lessons. For example, all of the teachers were impressed by the grid technique and wanted to know more about how they could implement it into their math lessons. Overall, the teachers were excited about the process and outcome of the backdrops, proud of their students, and thankful for my involvement as a teaching artist.
Teacher Artist Reflections

As a teaching artist, my role is to provide my honed artistic, conceptual thinking, problem-solving, and mento-
torship skills to students who are picking up a paintbrush for the first time—perhaps because they live with
guardians or attend schools that have never encouraged nor supported art making. For the last five years, I have
likened my position as a teaching artist to being a positive guide for youth, as through my own skills and career
I am modelling to them the future career and lifestyle pathways available. Personally, in pursuit of authentic
individuality and creativity (and their relevant tools), I set off on an educational journey of earning a Bachelor of
Fine Arts degree and a Master of Arts degree in Creative Process. A short time later, I found myself transformed
from an art-loving, public-school student to an impassioned Art Director—forging international partnerships,
offering free arts-based education experiences to marginalized communities around the globe, and fundrais-
ing to make it all possible (Art Relief International). I continued to expand myself through the visual, sensorial
elements of life that inspire me to regularly practice art making, writing, self-reflecting, and researching. Today,
I curiously study life through art making, researching, and teaching, and “living inquiry” is enveloped into my
praxis (the holistic study of life, art, research, and teaching). Living inquiry can be explained as “an embodied
encounter constituted through visual and textual understandings and experiences rather than mere visual and
textual representations” with a rigor that “comes from its continuous reflective and reflexive stance to engage-
ment, analysis and learning” (Springgay, xxix). I interpret these embodied encounters I have resonated with as
life realizations via an activity, such as art making, that occurred independently and authentically, without a
visual or textual representation present; and, that these “eureka” moments are possible through committed self-
reflection, continuously learning, and humbly analyzing one’s self for areas of growth, regularly.

As part of my post-reflection on this teaching artist experience, I engaged my art practice of collage. The large,
radial torn paper collage (Fig. 8) created right after the opera project, came from a calling to create something
that seemed whole, free from the commercialized rectangular art surface, and felt inclusive for all its parts. Just
as I was inviting an inclusive art and learning environment for the students based on the reciprocal wholeness of
each person’s ability to contribute to the mural. For me, sourcing the segments of color and texture from mag-
azines felt similar to searching through the visual elements of the students’ sketches, which I enjoyed so much.
Adhering the segments together seemed to me symbolic in the pooling together and honoring of many individ-
ual elements to create a collective work. The ripping process of tearing each piece of paper was like the physical,
fast-paced process I had in each session with the students: unfurling and stretching out (the canvas and myself)
the 6x9 feet surface; reaching and using a long dowel to grid and sketch on the canvas; weaving in and out of
children and educators to get everyone paints and brushes and tasks in a productive flow, and so on.

There was also a quick nature to the composite sketching process, as I had to make executive decisions for the
final backdrop based on students’ ideas—but there could have been many possible outcomes given the rich
detail and level of creativity students poured into their sketches. This composite sketching process was very
inspiring for me, as I had not drawn representationally in a while, and it reminded me of all of the drawing
training I have had, and how those hours of practice have allowed me to confidently create these final backdrops
for the opera with such joyous and eager students in a meaningful project.

This torn paper collage process, I realized, is metaphorical for a potential way forward in life. The process allows
me to make something from nothing—something from forgotten material: magazine pages. I repurpose the left-
over pages, rife with mediated content of our times, and weave together my own vision. I decide the arrangement, placement, juxtaposition, and conversation that all diverse parts, torn from the magazine, will have—and I build and stitch together thousands of pieces to retell my own narrative of these past, mediated events (news, fashion, ads, editorials, etc). I find this torn paper collage method to be empowering yet reflective, and I can envision sharing it with youth so that they can also feel that control and make sense of their worlds through this medium.

Fig. 8. Torn paper collage reflection (four feet in diameter) made after the opera program, with poem (see p. 144), H. Morrison.
Additionally, after this teaching artist experience, finding myself in social isolation due to COVID-19, I sought a way to quickly release ideas, writing, and drawings without being attached to the outcome. I encouraged myself to sketch and brainstorm and express myself more often, yet I could not get past the mental barriers of doing so, due to institutionalized associations of drawing (pressure to draw well with archival media that will meet certain quality standards upon completion). I thought of drawing regularly on a large sheet of butcher paper attached to my wall, but still felt that was too precious. I realized that I needed a white dry erase board in my room. So, I found a 2.5 x 4 feet white dry erase board at a thrift store.

Since acquiring these materials, I have been able to approach this board and spontaneously produce many drawings and writings, on my own and in spontaneous creation making sessions with a virtual creative collective, through Studio M*: A Research Creation Lab (www.studiom.space). Some of these drawings have since been featured in an online exhibition of artists creating messages of inspiration for others, despite quarantine (Arts Letters & Numbers). Surprisingly, I have felt proud of these spontaneous outcomes and have been able to draw regularly and more often than I have for many years. Time with the dry erase board has served as meditation and self-soothing therapy, as I have reached out for it for support on stressful days.

Encouraging expression on white boards could be a process to incorporate with students in schools going forward, seeing as most schools already have individual-sized chalk boards or dry erase boards for academic purposes. I think the accessibility of the erasable surface takes away the pressure and fear of creating, and allows new techniques and skills to grow. These materials could be embraced outside (or inside) of the standardized learning curricula and could be harnessed for positive student engagement, or even emotional and behavioral regulation.

Though students recognized and trusted me as the “expert,” as a visiting artist working on a short-term project with them, they were also interested in me as a person and asked about my personal life and upbringing. The foremost conversation between myself and all grade levels was about identity—who they feel they are now, and who they would like to be in the future. The most common questions were “how long have you been an artist?”, or “when did you first know that you wanted to be an artist?” I sensed the underlying “but what about my future?” pathway question underneath these simple questions—as that is my own core question when I am talking with arts professionals more experienced than myself. I tried to let students know that I chose this life while I was in high school based on my strong interest in visual arts, which began in my elementary days. I then went to art college; made sure to realize other strengths of mine and to invest in those other skills along the way.

Fig. 9, 10, & 11. Spontaneous dry erase board drawings made in quarantine, H. Morrison.
way (teaching, administration, leadership); and that I chose to stay strong on this non-linear, non-tradition-
al career path. I let them know that following your passion takes personal strength and a lot of hard work.

The opportunity for students, to be part of this whole project with a teaching artist, I felt demystified the myth
of the artist for these students, and for their teachers. A leveling force between all participants in this work
was the proximity to the physical ground, and witnessing each other in different bodily postures than what is
typical in the institutionalized school setting (e.g. stretching out across a canvas, holding yoga-like poses to reach
sections of the painting). Intentionally humanizing myself in simple ways, being on the ground with the students,
connecting with them at eye level, and being honest in my conversations with them about my life pathway as
an artist all facilitated deeper trust and connection
between the students and I, and amongst the students.

This, I believe further grounded, or debunked, their
perception of the genius, unattainable “artist” persona.

The myth of the artist (as I understand it from
research and lived experience as an artist in the
Western world) is that artists are more inclined than
others to be geniuses and to see the world in more
enlightened ways. This idea has elevated artists to
elitist levels, compounded by the commercial-
ization of art, and its “star-making,” and thus has
excluded many members of society from the arts due to
believing or even being told that art is not for them, they
will never be an artist who can survive economically
and/or that they were not endowed with the right skillset
to be artistic—or even creative (Ortega, Episode 138).

Being a professional artist or teaching artist is a choice
and can often entail a tough lifestyle—with a string
of short-term, independently contracted projects for
income, a need for strong time management and
organization skills, and the ability to be fast-
moving, flexible, responsive to and supportive of all
of the unique needs of partner or collaborator organi-
izations (schools, galleries and museums, non-profit
community groups, etc). For many professional artists
and teaching artists, there can be a great struggle be-
tween meeting basic personal needs and maintaining
the creative spirit necessary to fulfill their work. The
complex effort required of an artist emerged
in the poem I wrote while contemplating
further on the torn paper college reflection art piece.
The quotes I gathered from students—from their involuntary and authentic reactions to the project, its process, and the materials—seem to show why students need to be exposed to many creative career paths at an early age. Firstly, the experiential shift (alternative program days of painting, acting, singing, costume designing, and differentiation from their typical school day) provided opportunity for students to open up through novel activities, and access different modes of learning. Secondly, when students witnessed their own ability, and those of others—through teamwork and building relationships—students exhibited feelings of self-empowerment gained through exploration, and an inspirational model influencing the continuation of their own personal outlets outside of school or for future life-work pathways. Furthermore, the student bonding these large-scale projects afford is critical in these times of racial tension, when we know the significance of students with diverse backgrounds understanding and respecting each other.

Overall, this work connects deeply to my personal and professional passions for the inspirational impact art making has on students. My main mission as a teaching artist is to help others tap into their own creativity and (re)commit to their life’s potential. Art making has always strengthened my personal sense of intuition and problem-solving, by witnessing myself react, make decisions, and take actions about how to keep moving forward. Throughout 2020, my skills and abilities have shifted and have been channeled into other urgent work opportunities: making COVID-19 diagnostics testing kits for national and international use. My eye for detail, consistency, and contrast have allowed me to catch major quality errors and be promoted twice within my laboratory.
During these times of deepening global change, many artistic careers have needed to transform from the normal public venues of artist success and exposure. My art world efforts have been paused: an artist residency and exhibition I had been awarded have both been postponed, though I have been part of a virtual exhibition. Thanks to my background as an artist, I have been able to remain flexible and adaptable in finding work—while ever-curious and grounded outside of work, through my personal, creative rituals, which have recently flourished within virtual community.

Conclusion

At the moment, I wish I had more solutions to offer, like funding opportunities for families who are trying to innovate home-based, virtual education by shipping to them large canvases and art supplies so that they can safely experience large-scale projects. Yet, I hope that in sharing my teaching artist experience that this article can serve as an accessible beginning for families and educators in the larger, needed conversation of re-envisioning timely and meaningful education for youth. As parents and guardians, educators, and their school systems try to respond to the new, real, and rapidly changing needs of our youth, the arts should be grasped daily as responsive, radical, and healing tools. The many disciplines of movement, music, and visual arts have always been important and are arguably even more significant in youth’s daily experiences in order to comprehend and cope with all of the uncertainty and tension we are facing—as society finds ways to reinvent a safer and more just future. It is my hope that this article will be shared widely to spark independent project ideas for youth, and that parents and guardians will be inspired to work more with their local artists—or revive dormant artistic practices themselves.

Ideally, teaching artistry can spread critical and creative thought into one’s life outlook, perspective, and attitude. It can impact how we grow in life and take care of ourselves and others. Art making consistently reminds me that things are not always as black and white as they seem. It pays off to remember to breathe along the way, and it certainly pays off to be innovative and honor your individuality within community. When I see these lessons being grasped by youth through large-scale, community-bonding projects, such as OFA, I believe even more in the impact of art and am determined to share this experiential learning with parents, educators, and administrators.

Endnotes

1. This project touches upon K-12 standards of Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts in Language, as well as Speaking and Listening. Through regularly facilitated conversation around the elements and principles of art and design, more standards could be satisfied by including writing and reflection activities before, during, or after the visual arts portion of the project. Through the other disciplines of the opera program, the students reach these standards by writing lyrics, learning about language in song composition, script writing, and more.

Given the physical backdrop goal and the necessary steps in measuring, estimating, plotting lines, using rulers, scaling ratio, and problem-solving, this project could serve as the “real-world problem” when teaching for the following strands of the Illinois Common Core State Standards for Mathematics: Measurements and Data, Geometry, and Rations and Proportional Relationships. The project could also be tied into the Mathematical Practice Standards 1 and 5 across K-12, and could be more impactful in K-6.

While this arts-based project overwhelmingly satisfies the Illinois Standards for Arts Learning, it specifically meets the Anchors in the categories of Creating, Responding, and Connecting (2016.) In the current structure that students experience the project (three one-hour sessions with a guest teaching artist) these standards are probably met for K-7th grade. Yet, through the inherent material experience and instructional conversation necessary for the project, students could meet even more requirements with more time dedicated to the visual arts element of this opera project.
REFERENCES


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