

**BOOK REVIEW:  
COMMUNITY-  
BASED ART  
EDUCATION  
ACROSS THE  
LIFESPAN:  
FINDING  
COMMON  
GROUND**

*“This book explains the theory and practice of CBAE as transformative learning”*

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**ABSTRACT**

*This review of Community-based Art Education Across the Lifespan by Pamela Harris Lawton, Margaret A. Walker and Melissa Green gives a detailed description of this valuable resource for community artists, art educators and other stakeholders in community who want to use art to transform communities.*

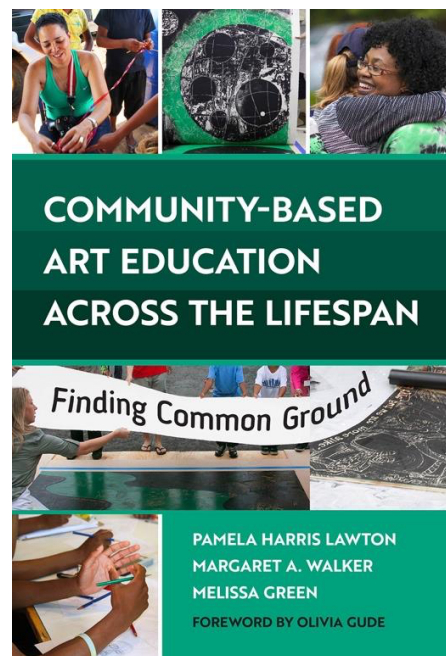
**KEYWORDS**

*Book Review, Community-based art education*

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Book Review: Lawton, P., Walker, M., & Green, M. (2019), *Community-based art education across the lifespan: Finding common ground*. NY: Columbia Press.

When I taught art in an urban high school, I wished I better understood students' neighborhoods, to better meet their needs. To that end I became involved in community art initiatives and through working as a community artist I became acquainted with former students in a whole new light. My tacit knowledge as an urban educator and artist allowed a modicum of success, but there were many things I wish I had known as I navigated working with various stakeholders and community learners.



*Community-based Art Education Across the Lifespan: Finding Common Ground* offers excellent information about how and why community-based art education (CBAE) serves artists and community participants. It broadens the concept of who we can learn from by decentering the artist as genius and welcoming knowledge of the community, both young and old. The text is written by three experienced community artist/educators, Pamela Lawton, Margaret Walker and Melissa Green. Each is associated with either museum or higher education, and show how CBAE is a tool for social justice by giving people across generations an opportunity to contribute and expand their creative capacity. This book explains the theory and practice of CBAE as transformative learning and shows how to collaborate and bring together diverse communities for art learning through partnerships. Each author has developed many successful community art initiatives and these are used to illustrate how to plan, execute and assess CBAE. Through these examples the authors show the challenges and opportunities within this transformative process. The text takes the reader through the steps of the ideation processes: working with groups by asking guiding questions, empowering

participants to use their personal narratives and transforming ideas into visual representations in a community's artwork. For me the most valuable aspect of this text is showing how to set up collaborations for art learning in community through examples that demonstrate theories of why these collaborations work.

The authors introduce the guiding principles of CBAE with the acronym E.R.E.C.T: education, reciprocity, empowerment, collaboration and transformation, to identify what happens in well-planned CBAE. This is followed with a review of pertinent psychosocial, cognitive and artistic developmental theory which grounds the efficacy of art engagement in community settings, noting that the aesthetic value of community-based art may be trumped by learning and social relationships that are developed. A broader understanding of the learner throughout various adult stages of life is informative and may be helpful in appreciating what the adult learner brings to community art.

Educational theories of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) experiential learning and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) are discussed in relation to andragogy (self-directed learning) because each plays a key role in understanding how CBAE works. Lawton, whose research focuses on intergenerational learning, expands on these in discussing her theory of age-integrated arts learning curriculum. Based on her personal art practice, *Artstories* participants bring together imagery and text in an artform to preserve, explore and reinterpret stories of different generations within the community. These empowering events emulate the creative power of a family-like environments, foster art learning and build intergenerational community. These positive aspects of CBAE practice, Lawton states, are equivalent to the transformative event Mezirow originally attributed to "disorienting dilemmas" which cause critical self-reflection.

The practical aspects of this book are chapters on planning, partnerships, the challenges and opportunities of implementation, and finally assessment. Each stand-alone chapter offers solid advice. The chapter on locating stakeholders and communities lists eleven great reasons why art educators should work with communities, and includes a helpful section on navigating privilege, finding the right partner(s) to work with and building rapport with the community. The guidelines for planning and implementing successful collaborations with many different stakeholders are outlined, with a caveat that the unexpected will happen. The authors point out that is the nature of CBAE, and openings for community input and flexibility for accommodating new ideas is part of the process. In the chapters on implementation, practical ideas are suggested to build in success, like giving participants small experiences to become familiar with processes and outcomes before tackling a larger project. Vignettes demonstrate how participants' voices are valued as they express the personal, social, moral, cultural and political concerns of the community. Validating people by honoring their contribution is part of the important recognition given them and celebrating their contributions is paramount. The chapter on project and research assessments relates both to the community project and to what can be learned from these projects and processes as research for students. The appendices offer lesson plans of several kinds, the most helpful being an age-integrated learning lesson plan which accommodates the multi-age learning and in-depth planning that grounds strong CBAE, as well as online resources.

The strength of this book is the broad range of information it offers for the researcher, K-16 art educators, community artists and non-profit organizations. It provides a road map for putting together a collaboration which can result in finding a community's core strength and empowering people's collective voice. This well documented research with multi-generational populations supports age-integrated arts learning curriculum and offers ways to making positive contributions by creating community and finding common ground.

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### References

- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.