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Shift: Moving art classes into rural America

by

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## Abstract

For the past 25 years academia has worked to create virtual and on-line classes. They have become mainstream and an expectation at each university. They want to keep education accessible for individuals unable to come to campus or that live in remote locations. Across the country universities have shrinking enrollment for their on-campus courses. The students that do come to campus learn differently than what most professors have been taught themselves. These students are passionate about the world and they want to impact their communities. The usual lecture or art demo may not be enough to prepare our students for the rapidly changing world.

What if instructors changed their delivery method of instruction, leave the classroom/studio, and create curriculum that serve the communities in which they reside? Amy Schmierbach, professor of art at Fort Hays State University in Hays, KS, started teaching a social practice course in 2019. This course brings her art students off campus to make art with an underserved community, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. By taking students out of the studio Schmierbach is able to teach her art students new art techniques, professional development, and community collaboration while addressing needs of the community. Her students learn other important skills that may be difficult to teach on campus, such as community building, activism, communication, empathy, and diversity. Community based teaching offers the students a purpose to stay on campus for their education, while enhancing community needs.

When a death profoundly impacted me, I vowed to make art in collaboration with others while directing attention towards altering our collective social conscience. I started weaving in small community groups and with grade school students to foster a new dialogue in my community. Later, I designed a college course where students and I left campus to establish a studio in our town to draw and weave with people who themselves are marginalized. Here is how it happened:

The pandemic brought about drastic changes in academia, abruptly making even the most reluctant of faculty recreate courses to work remotely. Suddenly teaching through a computer screen forced art instructors to re-evaluate the curriculum.

Apprehension and uncertainty followed. The precedence set by these changes regarding online delivery of instruction also strikes fear about the future of art departments. Of course, this is not a new concern. Since universities began racing towards successful remote learning programmes over 25 years ago, traditional art instructors feared (and continue to fear) the move to replace the studio context with a virtual one. Maybe, academia will never look the same after the pandemic – and perhaps that is a good thing.

Do we really want to go back to the way we taught for so many years? What if we created a new and improved normal? It is about time to consider physically moving studio courses off-campus and into rural communities to nurture art's relevance to societal change. In 2020, I witnessed the hard work, modifications and creativity of my peers. They have risen to the occasion, redesigning curricula and delivery methods to meet the immediate needs of an altered world. What if we took it a step further and evaluated how our courses could also function to reach other goals? Through the campus upheaval of 2020, a glaring spotlight shone on the role human interactions play in on-

campus learning experiences. As evidenced by the public turmoil caused by events such as the police killing of George Floyd, that same light also exposed deficiencies where society does not serve all its members with compassion and equity. Universities have a distinct role in creating this systemic change. Professors should develop sustainable programmes to share their knowledge, curriculum and students off-campus in service to the community. Campuses need innovative programmes that incorporate underserved segments of our communities with our students' interests, especially in rural America. This change is possible and demonstrated by a regional liberal arts university course that brought art students and community members with developmental and intellectual disabilities together to make art.

I live in Hays, Kansas, and am a professor at Fort Hays State University (FHSU). With a population of just over 20,000 and situated in western Kansas, Hays is barely large enough to call a city, and it feels like a rural town ([United States Census Bureau 2019](#): n.pag.). A local incident in 2016 caused a major shift in the way I make art and teach art.

On 18 August 2016, I just left a faculty meeting in my usual frenzied fashion. I rushed in my car to pick up my son from elementary school. I challenged myself to stay focused on demands that lay stacked in my mind: installing my sabbatical exhibit, deadlines for updating the curriculum, dinner and questions from students in my classes. Plus, I was to be at my son's school by 2:50 p.m. That day was like any weekday. I was late to pick up my son again. Balancing teaching and parenting a child with autism is never easy, especially when after-school care with adequate supervision for my child's unique needs did not exist. On the drive to the other side of town, my phone vibrated: an

alert that an incident close to my son's school initiated a lockdown. I did not think much of it because children already swarmed out of the building by the time I pulled up. I grabbed my son and rushed off in another direction to drop him at my husband's work so I made it to my next commitment. Driving through an intersection, I noticed several flashing police cars and an ambulance. As I am still in the midst of my usual frenzy, I simply surmise that is why there was a lockdown.

Two days later, I learned that a police officer shot and killed a 36-year-old man with autism following a minor traffic violation. I read the newspaper report Saturday morning on the couch, attempting to decompress after a crazy hectic week. The encounter between the man with autism and the police officer became escalated when they could not communicate clearly with each other. A local police officer shot the man outside his group home on that residential street my son and I passed on our way to my husband's work (Schwien 2016b). A communication breakdown during a stressful encounter over a minor infraction ended in the death of a man with autism. I sat numb and in shock. Then I broke down, an ugly cry for a man I did not even know. The grief crept into every part of my life for days. This man was my son in several years. My 9-year-old was still cute. Ten years later, I realize my son's disabilities will stick out more and not look so cute. Many will find him odd, think he is weird. At that time, I could not imagine my son responding appropriately in stressful situations.

A demonstration was organized two weeks later outside of the police station. I decided to join the demonstration. There I stood in the silence lined up outside of the Hays Municipal Building with about 30 other people. Many of the other demonstrators held signs saying, 'You talk. We will listen' (Schwien 2016a). No city official responded

to our demonstration. A couple of local reporters were the only people to engage us. No one else talked to us. I stood in silence for an hour. I reflected on my son, my job, my community and this tragic death. I took in the awkward reticence.

On the drive home after the demonstration, I vowed that I could do better. Society must do better. The numbness in which I operated since the killing was wearing off. I took a hard look at what I was doing with my life. I realized that my feeling out of place at the demonstration had been an opportunity for meditation and reflection.

Meditation became a new habit while on sabbatical the year before this man's death. During my first meditation experience, I made a connection between meditation and the way I teach drawing. This developed into the collaboration with Dr Eugene Rice, professor of philosophy. We led students on a three-month exploration of learning meditation and mindful drawing exercises. We learned to sit in discomfort, to be still and to breathe. We made slow marks on paper that reflected our meditation experiences. In her written reflection about this research project, undergraduate participant Sophie Young stated:

Becoming mindful is a journey – it cannot be achieved instantly. The mind wanders, and when you notice the wandering, you bring it back to the present moment. By dabbing my feet into some charcoal, I captured the journey we must walk to truly be mindful. With enough patience and repetition, mindfulness becomes habit. The mental endurance it takes to form the habit of mindful thinking seems meaningless until you've walked the same walk many times.

(Young 2016)

If it was not for the research that made me practise how to be still, I cannot fathom how I would have behaved at the silent demonstration demanding answers at the police station. Instead, the killing of this man with autism was my call to action. I was not exactly sure

how, but I did know that my call to action involved individuals with intellectual disabilities in my work. I would teach differently in and out of the classroom, making sure the next generation of students understands the importance of diversity awareness, acceptance, inclusion and equity. I believed in how the power art has to enrich people, communities and society.

## More than 700 weavings showcase individual differences in a community

For my first collaboration, I approached Breanna Taylor, MA, CCC-SLP, assistant clinic coordinator, Herdon Clinic in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at FHSU. She worked with my son at the Herdon Clinic, which provides students with hands-on training with real clients: children with autism or hearing disorders up to adults. After I told Taylor my idea, she arranged for my first collaborative weaving project with a small group of adult clients. This first set of CD weavings would become part of the whole series of collaborations.

I offered a simple weaving project on a CD to the group as a way for me to communicate with group members all together and individually. CD weaving is a common craft project that involves wrapping yarn around the CD that becomes the warp. Large plastic needles threaded with yarn pass through the centre of the CD to create a weaving. Using the CD matrix provided stability when the yarn is pulled tight through the warp. Plastic needles are easy to grip for all types of hands. As expected, individual group members were apprehensive but only at first. I was excited to see how these small weavings showed individuality, each one different, unique. All of us seemed to enjoy the experience of doing something together.



After weaving with clients of Herdon Clinic at FHSU, I was energized and spoke with Ann Leiker, a social worker for the Center for Life Experience. This non-profit organization facilitated several support groups for families impacted by suicide, for young families and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Two of these groups collaborated with me to make other unique weavings for the series; some weavings became memorials for a lost loved one.

I continued with all sorts of people associated with a variety of regional organizations over the next six months making art. I gathered yarn and needles and wove with local students and teachers in our public schools, college students in the FHSU psychology department, other mental health organizations and assisted living facilities, and two local Girl Scout troops. I also partnered to make weavings with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities at a day programme. During each weaving session, I made myself navigate through layers of my discomfort to talk to and work with members of various segments of the Hays community. When possible, I introduced conversations about how people interacted with each other.

From December 2016 to April 2017, over 700 small weavings were collected and exhibited at the Hays Public Library Schmidt art gallery. The dimension of the CDs provided uniformity for installation while creating a sameness-but-different that extended past the visual: underneath the colourful exterior, we are all the same. Ten months after the police killing of a man with autism, this exhibit was a homage to the individual differences in our community (Janney 2018). See [Figure 1](#).

**Learning in all directions**

For the next series of weaving projects, I engaged students to participate with me in one-on-one collaboration with persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I had several conversations about my new mission in life with Tammy Dreiling, my son's caseworker at Developmental Services of North West Kansas (DSNWK). Dreiling allowed me to use her as a sounding board. One idea involved matching first responders with people with disabilities to make art. That idea got nixed (at least temporarily) because it was too soon after the police killing. Many in the disability community in Hays were traumatized by the event. When I told Dreiling about another idea, she recommended I speak with the director of programmes and services at DSNWK, Scott Stults. Stults approved the collaboration of artmaking between my students and DSNWK clients.

(For clarity, student artist refers to one of my students from FHSU, and client artist refers to a participating client from DSNWK.)

In the summer of 2017, I secured a small grant from the Surface Design Association Engaging Community (SDA.EG.17 – Schmierbach). It began as an undergraduate research/social practice art project. With grant funds, I purchased a large tapestry loom 30 inches × 40 inches and paid one student artist to go to a day programme three to four hours a week and weave with client artists. See [Figure 2](#).

The paid student artist's participation in the project inspired a couple more of my students to volunteer. None of the student artists possessed any experience working with a person with a disability before this weaving project, let alone an intellectual disability. These student artists were nervous before they got started, like most people put in a new

situation with a new group of people that were different from them. Even though my student artists did not know what to expect, each wanted to challenge themselves.

A student artist, or a pair of student artists, travelled from campus a few blocks away to be with client artists at their facility on different days during client artists' scheduled free time. No one was required to weave with us. Several client artists engaged with consistency. Three or four client artists sat around the loom with the student artist and wove. They faced one another weaving the yarns together. This close physical interaction could be awkward and distressing for some people, but these art students seemed to appreciate the benevolence of the activity.

In studio classes on campus, I often talked to my students about being uncomfortable in artmaking and noticing being uncomfortable. My graduate school professor James D. Butler, MFA, would always say, '[t]o make good art, you must stand on the edge'. That phrase has stuck with me. I pass this onto my students by inserting to notice those things that make you uncomfortable and to push yourself. Feeling uncomfortable means you are on the right path. Avoidance of the discomfort may be why so many fellow human beings do not understand the importance of and the need for diversity awareness, acceptance, inclusion and equity in our community. Most people can only know their own wants and needs. They equate uncomfortable as bad or wrong, and then they become scared. Even though my student artists were scared to leave the safety of the university to make art with individuals unlike themselves, they understood that the challenge would help them grow into better artists and compassionate humans.

Student artists were more than teachers and coaches to the client artists. They were co-collaborators and equal partners in these weavings. Student artists reported back

several times about discussions they enjoyed with client artists while working together around the loom; topics included sports, dances, friends and favourite foods. They remarked that it was like talking with other college students on campus. These conversations proved just as important as the weavings. Above all, students saw how the act of making art together facilitated human interaction; that process is more important than the art itself. From being involved with this project, one student artist said he learned more about patience. Many college students struggle with verbal communication. Those who participated in this project invested several hours a week talking to others who communicated differently, thereby developing practical communication skills.

While working alongside the client artists, the student artists learned the importance of play and exploration of process. The student artists enjoyed observing how the client artists explored weaving. On another occasion, after a student artist gave a quick demonstration of how to weave over and under the warp, a client artist wanted to weave her way, wrapping, overlapping and crossing yarns. The student artists enjoyed watching how this client artist explored weaving. That kind of innovation was encouraged and celebrated. Client artists were encouraged to make their own choices. The freedom of choice was important in this project. Most importantly, my student artists learned to enjoy the process of artmaking, without worrying about perfect technique.

Student artists also took the skills and the wisdom the collaboration afforded back to their campus art classes. They all agreed about enjoying the process more in their personal work; they were more willing to take risks. They experimented more. They started to understand why they wanted to be an artist and its importance in our society.

They also found it easier to communicate their intentions and concepts. McKenna, my first student to work on this project, stated:

This weaving project introduced me to a whole new world of art. It became this platform for connection, empowerment, and understanding. I began to see the value in the process of artmaking and how it can be just as important, if not more important, than the final product itself. Creating alongside other individuals who purely enjoyed expressing themselves in the context of art and who were so quick to try new things and stretch the rules of traditional artmaking has hugely inspired me in my work. They have challenged me creatively more than I think they will ever know, and I truly believe this project played a great role in shaping me into the artist that I am now.

(Schmierbach 2020)

During my sixteen years of teaching art, I struggled to get my students to experiment. Over those years, I had observed the difficulty they had at playing with materials and taking risks that might help them develop a personal style. So when these student artists came back to their studio classes on campus, they were more willing to play and experiment. I was elated.

This weaving project extended six months and resulted in an exhibition of five colourful collaborative tapestry weavings at Hays Public Library Schmidt Gallery from 20 April to 20 May 2018 (Fort Hays State University 2018). See Figure 3.

## Warehouse weavings plus

For the fall of 2018, the Kansas Creative Industries Association's Innovative Partnerships awarded a grant to create The Collaborative Art Project (NFY17-013 with support from National Endowment for the Arts). This project increased in scale from our first partnership with DSNWK, which matched the funds afforded by the grant. DSNWK also secured additional space at their warehouse to bring more artists together. The warehouse

not only allowed more room to make art, but it could also be furnished with stations to incorporate drawing, collage and photography. With our grants and donations, we purchased more table looms, floor looms and drawing supplies. FHSU also awarded an undergraduate research grant to purchase equipment necessary to document the project (UREFY19 – Schmierbach).

As word about this project spread around campus, more art students expressed interest. This project was set up to pay a couple of student artists to work alongside the client artists. One of my brilliant students, however, asked if she could receive credit for working on this project instead of getting paid. At that moment, I realized this project should be a course. A quick discussion with my department chair got an experimental class on the books. This course offered was titled Art as Social Practice. The class met six hours a week at the warehouse just as we would if the class occurred on campus. Fifteen client artists and seven student artists making art for the first two hours each period. After the client artists left, the student artists and I used the last 45 minutes for debriefing, lectures, discussions, brainstorming and guest presentations.

One early presenter was art therapist and disability advocate Tamara Schardt, MS. She was invited to speak with the student artists. Schardt shared her experiences as a disability advocate at Arc Colorado and working with artists with disabilities at a chapter of VSA (which stands for Very Special Arts, an international organization on arts and disability) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She told us about the language conventions required to work with individuals with disabilities. We learned how to be sensitive to individuals who may have been abused or experienced some other trauma. Schardt also delineated the differences between collaborative artmaking and art therapy because The

Collaborative Art Project was a collaboration and not to be mistaken for art therapy. During class time without the client artist, the student artists and I brainstormed every art project together. Then at the appropriate time, we asked the client artists for input in each project. We learned that most of the client artists loved colour. And we learned each artist (student or client) loved different parts of the artmaking process. All these artists wanted total control of the part of the project they made. So that is what the student artists and I facilitated.

From the beginning of this project I kept stressing that everyone at the looms and tables are all artists. We made art together like a college art studio working on a group project. We set up stations for tapestry, table and floor weaving. We set up separate stations for drawing, painting and collaging. Client artists were allowed to pick what they wanted to work on each day, and some moved to a couple of different stations during one session. I heard more conversations about music, sports and families. Friendships were formed. Student artists helped client artists when they needed assistance with supplies or when someone wanted to start a new project. It was exhilarating to watch client artists become self-reliant as semester progressed. See [Figure 4](#).

(Note that for the privacy of those concerned, names in this paragraph have been changed.)

It was a pleasure to see how the different artists worked. Mike, a client artist who worked on the projects the previous semester, wove on a small tapestry loom every day. Client artist Tina loved drawing with student artist Madelyne. These two worked on drawings and then stitched over them. Student artist Shai loved to talk about music with client artist Tim who also loved writing stories on his drawings. Student artists Laura and

Megan took turns weaving with client artist Delores. Sometimes they worked in complete silence, and sometimes Delores teased the other two relentlessly. Student artists Marisa and Micheala took it upon themselves to keep supplies available and organized. By mid-semester, the student artists took charge of the artmaking sessions. It was a thrill to observe how the student artists led. Towards the end of the semester, the student artists were asked to collage the work of the semester together. They made pairings of small weavings with watercolour drawings, or they collaged photographs with graphite drawings. Each collage was totally unlike any other, but each of the composite artworks related to each other and created a coherent body of work. Each collage was mounted and framed, which was a new skill for most of the student artists. By the end of this first semester's class, an exhibition of 40 framed collaborative collages and 20 weavings was installed at the Hays Public Library. The student artists installed and promoted the exhibition that opened to the public from 26 April to 20 May 2019 (Ogle 2019). See

[Figure 5](#)

The exhibition elicited powerful reactions from the community. FHSU administrators and Hays community members admired both the artworks and marvelled at what this project accomplished. At a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the project, DSNWK administrator LaVonne Giess remarked:

Many of the individuals that we serve will never be able to attend FHSU, but they love to attend sporting events, wear their 'Tiger Gold on Friday' proudly, and this is just one more way to be a part of the FHSU family.

(Giess 2019)

I heard my students gasp as they realized, just then, that attending a university is a privilege many do not and could not have.



The student artists came to this course with varied skills and strengths. During the semester, every student artist learned about professional development, mounting and framing, installing exhibitions, how to document a process, social media promotion, marketing, collaging, tapestry weaving, loom weaving, project management, studio maintenance and contract development. What most impacted student artists, however, was building relationships with the client artists. Student artist Megain Pfannenstiel summarized her work in The Collaborative Art Project:

The most valuable aspect of this experience is having real-life experiences in not only the art world, but also in our community. This experience with The Collaborative Art Project has given me great insight on bringing art and the entire community together. It has also given me insight on what I truly want to do after I graduate this May. I now know that I want my life to be connecting with people through art and show people in our communities that art is a beautiful and powerful force bringing people from all walks of life together. My plan is to have my career in a nonprofit art center or help to continue and expand The Collaborative Art Project, while I create my own art on the side.

(Schmierbach 2020)

Because of the initial success of The Collaborative Art Project, the Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission awarded a larger innovative partnerships grant to expand the programme to two other rural locales in western Kansas (NFY18-103 with support from National Endowment for the Arts). This year we will also expand to include local high school art students to engage in our collaborative artmaking. By expanding to other rural communities, we hope to spread the love created in Hays. It will provide art students in this programme leadership opportunities that bridge communication gaps.

The spark that shifted my goals and brought about this project demonstrates how every voice is valid and meaningful; individual voices brought together to enflame

societal change. Every artist who was involved in this project gained some level of understanding, no matter the ability. Student artists became fearless, community-minded and empathetic advocates. Observing and overcoming personal discomfort and building communal purpose in curriculum can generate transformation in our rural communities. The Collaborative Art Project and its partners proved that change is possible, one class and one artist at a time, filling gaps that make our communities (and our country) even stronger.

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Figure 1: Exhibition attendees admiring the CD weavings during The Weaving Connections Project, Hays Public Library Schmidt Gallery, 2018. Photo courtesy of Amy Schmierbach.



Figure 2: Two DSNWK client artists and FHSU student McKenna O’Hare weaving during The Rug Project, DSNWK, Reed Center, Hays, KS, 2018. Photo courtesy of Amy Schmierbach.



Figure 3: *Rug 3*, 2018. Yarn. 30 inches × 40 inches. Hays Public Library Schmidt

Gallery, Hays, KS. Photo courtesy of Amy Schmierbach.



Figure 4: DSNWK client artist and FHSU student Marisa Kistler drawing during The Collaborative Art Project, DSNWK, Employment Connections Building, Hays, KS, 2019. Photo courtesy of Laura Krug.



Figure 5: DNSWK client artists and FHSU students pose in front of a wall of weavings during The Collaborative Art Project Exhibition, Hays Public Library Schmidt Gallery, Hays, KS, 2019. Photo courtesy of Amy Schmierbach.

Amy Schmierbach, Professor of Art at Fort Hays State University FHSU, teaches drawing and general education courses. Amy received a BFA from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville and an MFA from Illinois State University in Printmaking. She received the prestigious President's Distinguished Scholar Award at FHSU and the Master Educator Award from the Foundations in Art Theory and Education FATE. Amy has exhibited her work across North America and has received many grants to help support her practice and community engaged work.

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