

# **Engaging a Developmentally Disabled Community Through Arts-Based Service-Learning**

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## **Abstract**

This study examined whether teaching in a community arts organization that provides services for people with developmental disabilities enabled preservice art teachers to better understand diverse contexts of art programs and the benefits of teaching the arts to others. Through this activity, the author also examined whether preservice art teachers became more civic-minded individuals. Preservice art teachers applied course concepts in a community setting by teaching art lessons to people with disabilities. Pretest and posttest questionnaires, students' reflections, and observation were used to study changes in preservice art teachers' perceptions by considering variables and indicators from a model proposed by Amy Driscoll et al. (1998) to assess students involved in service-learning. Preservice art teachers showed a reduction in anxiety around this community, leadership development, strong relationship building, and a change in perceptions about community engagement and outreach. However, results revealed shortcomings in realizing concern for social justice implicit in the goals of this study.

## **Introduction**

**M**any art educators are committed to social justice, whether in the K-12 classroom, higher education, nonprofit arts organizations, museums, or state/federal arts policy organizations. According to Cipolle (2010), adults committed to social justice have common characteristics such as family values, educational environment, and comparable service experiences. Cipolle (2010) explained that early experiences for an individual are the "key ingredients that contribute to forming an action identity committed to justice" (p. 28).

Personally, I can trace my own interest in social justice issues to high school, when I was given the opportunity to participate in a leadership academy program that encouraged high school students to connect with the community. I remember working on Saturdays organizing and preparing boxes of food for delivery at a local food pantry. In my case, community experience planted the seed for my continued interest in social justice issues.

My high school experience guided me into service as an undergraduate student, and then on to joining the Peace Corps and participating in service throughout graduate school. During the years I spent teaching as a graduate teaching assistant and a visiting assistant professor, I provided similar opportunities to my undergraduate students. These opportunities would be considered community service or “light” service-learning. The distinction is that service-learning has an explicit connection to teaching and learning that community service lacks (*Bringler & Hatcher, 1995*). I had yet to fully appreciate the extent of the connections that could be made through service-learning. Exploring service-learning as a vehicle for research had not crossed my mind. Not until I became an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in the Dallas–Fort Worth (DFW) metroplex was I introduced to a more prescribed form of service-learning and its implications for research.

### **The Beginning: Context and Community Need**

As a faculty member, I was selected to be a University Service-Learning Fellow with the Center for Community Service-Learning (CCSL) for the 2012–2013 academic year. The fellowship consisted of participation in monthly seminars with other faculty fellows; learning from readings about service-learning; writing reflections; listening to guest speakers who had conducted successful service-learning projects; discussing service-learning possibilities, relationships, teaching, and research with other faculty across the university; and developing and writing service-learning plans. Faculty fellows were to embrace the mission of the UTA CCSL, which was to enhance learning and civic responsibility through community engagement.

Throughout the Fall 2012 semester, I was dedicated to learning about and planning a service-learning course. I used the Spring 2013 semester to implement my first service-learning course, *Applying and Teaching Art Curricula*. The preservice art teachers in this course worked with a nonprofit organization called Evergreen Life Services, which provides services for people with developmental disabilities. Evergreen serves, provides for, and champions individuals with disabilities in five ways:

1. The organization’s members are committed to the inclusion of people with disabilities in their home communities.

2. They have a basic belief in and assurance to advocacy for human and civil rights.
3. They are dedicated to the highest possible quality of life for disabled individuals.
4. They are devoted to encouraging the spiritual growth and nurturance of all people.
5. They maintain a long-term commitment to provide for people with disabilities by maintaining a stable, viable, principled, and financially healthy organization.

In 2012, Evergreen reached out to local universities in the DFW area looking for faculty in the arts who could provide student partnerships for a new program called the Cultural Arts and Production Center (CAPC). I was aware of and had volunteered for similar programs when I was in graduate school, and I knew the potential benefits to people with developmental disabilities. The program's mission was "dynamic curriculum that include[d] art, music, theater, ceramics, and production in an environment that fosters creativity and inspires self-reliance for those with developmental disabilities" (*Evergreen Life Services, 2015, para. 2*). The idea was to incorporate the arts into the everyday experiences of clients whom Evergreen serves, hoping that clients would not only be able to sell their artwork for profit, but also to use art for self-expression as a therapeutic coping mechanism for emotional highs and lows.

My faculty fellowship and the contact by Evergreen seemed a perfect match. As an art educator, I wanted to provide and encourage my students to build relationships with the community as I had when I was young. Incorporating service-learning with my undergraduate course would enrich and engage preservice art teachers and meet a community need; furthermore, it would provide an opportunity to conduct a pilot research study. My research objective for this study was to explore how preservice art teachers teaching in a community arts organization with people who have developmental disabilities could better understand socially and culturally diverse contexts of art programs and the benefits of teaching the arts to others. I was also curious to learn how these preservice art teachers could become more civic-minded individuals.

The goal of this research was to examine whether or not students could apply and test course concepts from *Developing and Constructing Art Curricula* (the Fall 2012 prerequisite course) in the Spring 2013 course, *Applying and Teaching Art Curricula*, which would include service-learning. The two courses constituted

a curricular sequence in which the first was a prerequisite for the second. In *Developing and Constructing Art Curricula*, students learned strategies, theories, methods, philosophies, and assessments employed in the teaching of art. In the subsequent service-learning course, *Applying and Teaching Art Curricula*, they were able to apply and test the ideas and concepts learned in the first. This research is important for preservice art teachers because in most schools, art teachers will encounter disabled youth in their classrooms; the information presented here has the potential to enhance art teaching skills and to promote a better understanding of adults and children with developmental disabilities.

### **Service-Learning and Art Education**

To understand service-learning's roots, one must look to Dewey's (1938) ideas about experiential education and Freire's (1993) action-oriented, critical consciousness. Dewey, influenced by a profound belief in democracy, considered two fundamental elements—schools and civil society—to be major topics needing attention. He argued for a quality education where people would learn through experience, experimentation, purposeful learning, and freedom. Freire believed education to be a political act that could not be divorced from pedagogy. Both theorists advocated education as a mechanism for social change and laid the foundation for what is today called service-learning (Deans, 1999). Service-learning is similar to and has the same theoretical background as action research, participatory research, popular education, empowerment research, participatory action research, community-based research, and others (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 defined service-learning as a method under which participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community. Strand et al. (2003) saw the bases of the method in collaboration, democratization of knowledge, and social change and justice. Cipolle (2010) perceived service-learning and social change in the context of enhanced awareness and critical consciousness, referring to deepening the awareness of self, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of others, developing a deeper awareness and broader perspective of social issues, and seeing one's potential to make changes in society.

For some time, art educators have explored community-based art education (*Bastos, 2002; Ulbricht, 2005*), community-based art and community art (*Adejumo, 2000; Bastos & Hutzel, 2004; Congdon, 2004; Hutzel & Cerulean, 2003*), service-learning and the arts (*Buffington, 2007; Hutzel, 2007; Hutzel, Russell, & Gross, 2010; Krensky & Steffen, 2008; Russell & Hutzel, 2007; Taylor, 2002, 2004*), and art gallery spaces and teacher preparation in the context of service-learning (*Innella, 2010; Milbrant, 2006*). Community-based art education approaches share a number of traits with service-learning: collaboration, democratization of knowledge, and social change and justice (*Strand et al., 2003*). Viewed through the theories of Dewey, Freire, and others, engaging students in an art education curriculum or art-based project contextualized by service-learning can have the beneficial effect of supporting their development in various positive learning outcomes across the full spectrum of art content, pedagogy, civil society, and social justice.

The National Youth Leadership Council developed service-learning standards for quality practice. When these standards are linked to the arts, one can better connect art education and service-learning. Brown and Leavitt (*2009*) provided a list of arts-based service-learning (ABSL) standards:

1. "ABSL has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs, in-depth exploration and experiential learning in the arts, and specified outcomes.
2. ABSL actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant arts and service activities.
3. ABSL provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating arts-based experiences with guidance from teachers, teaching artists, and community members.
4. ABSL promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.
5. ABSL partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs through the arts.

6. ABSL incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself, one's relationship to society, one's relationship to the arts, and the role of the arts in society.

7. ABSL engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability" (p. 12).

The goals for service-learning and art education complement each other in ways that make students stronger not only in understanding the arts but also in backing their communities.

### **Connecting Art Making to Service-Learning**

Using the Driscoll et al. (1998) model of student variables and indicators to assess student changes and perceptions while involved in service-learning, measurement tools were developed to capture the existence of an indicator or measure changes in an indicator. Table 1 displays the variables and indicators for measuring student impact in this study.

**Table 1. Student Variables and Indicators**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
Awareness of community	Knowledge of community history, strengths, problems, definition
Involvement with community	Quantity/quality of interactions, attitude toward involvement
Commitment to service	Plans for future service
Career choice	Influence of community placement job opportunities
Self-awareness	Changes in awareness of strengths, limits, direction, role, goals
Personal development	Participation in additional courses, extracurricular activities
Academic achievement	Role of community, experience in understanding and applying content
Sensitivity to diversity	Attitude, understanding of diversity, comfort and confidence
Autonomy/independence	Learner role
Sense of ownership	Learner role
Communication	Class interactions, community interactions

Three methods were employed to measure impact: pretest/posttest questionnaires, student reflections, and observation. The pretest/posttest questionnaires revolved around the variables listed in Table 1. Reflection was used to gather qualitative data in the form of testimonials (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Reflection is an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supported form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it” (Dewey, 1933, p. 146). Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Reflection prompts were provided based on the widely-used framework: What? So what? Now what? This framework was based on David Kolb’s (1984) “concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation” (p. 41) analytic phases of the reflective process. The first question prompted students to describe their experiences during arts-based service-learning events. To answer the second question, students examined and interpreted their descriptions in terms of their personal development. For the third question, students contemplated the impact of the experience to insights and connections with the future of their teaching and civic engagement. Students turned in one-page reflection responses in the form of printed hard copies or by e-mail. Observations and photographs of students were recorded while the students participated in arts-based service-learning events during class.

## Preparation

During the first few weeks of the Spring 2013 semester, students in Applying and Teaching Art Curricula read about art therapy, developmental disability, and service-learning, and they engaged in class discussions. This armed students with an understanding of the people with whom they would work and with the concepts on which service-learning is based.

To improve rapport and augment relationships, the class was split into three groups. These three groups worked with a set of three groups of people at the CAPC for three art-making sessions, each of which was 3 hours in duration. With this structure, it was possible for students to plan one art unit with three lessons, using one lesson for each of the art-making sessions. In groups, the students chose an overall theme or big idea for the unit and developed three lessons that corresponded to that big idea. Used in art education for unit and lesson planning, *big ideas* are themes that reflect big questions about the human experience (Stewart & Walker,

2005). Students planned, developed, applied, and taught their units. Students had learned the process for planning a unit and its lessons during the fall course. As part of the planning process, I instructed students to use the art therapy literature to initiate ideas and to prepare their unit's lessons based on the needs of the developmentally disabled participants. While planning and developing these lessons, they prepared prototypes to test methods and strategies, working through kinks and thinking about how challenging the making of art might be for someone with developmental disabilities.

## **Art-Making Sessions**

Overall, the service-learning project consisted of three art-making sessions with roughly 36 developmentally disabled adults and 18 students over a period of one semester. Students worked in groups of six teaching art to 12 participants. To distinguish between the subjects in the research, student participants will be called "students," and the CAPC participants will be called "participants" throughout this article. Additionally, I required students to volunteer at the CAPC for 10 hours outside of class to support stronger relationship building and understanding of this population. Approval from the Institutional Review Board was received before the semester and research began.

**Session 1.** Each of the three groups of students planned and tested their art unit and lessons for Sessions 1 through 3 before teaching them to participants. Working from the art therapy literature, Group 1 chose the unit theme music and worked with both fluid and resistive materials. Landgarten (1987) positioned materials along a continuum, using the terms least controlled and more controlled. Materials that have more structure (like collage or wood assemblage) or more solidity (like pencils or firm clay) are described as resistive or *more controlled*. Materials that have less structure, that flow easily, or that can be manipulated more freely are described as being fluid or *less controlled* (Hinz, 2009; Lusebrink, 1990).

For Session 1, Group 1 prepared a lesson based on fluid materials working in 2D with watercolor paints, glue, and salt. They introduced a variety of music as inspiration and to evoke emotion for participants' art making. Each participant was able to experiment with the watercolors and see how the glue and salt interacted with the paint.

Group 2 decided on the unit theme of emotions. Although art therapists share a consensus that fluid materials elicit more



emotional responses than resistive ones, research to confirm such observations definitively is lacking (Malchiodi, 2012). “Emotional or cognitive content is dependent on other aspects of the creative process including the specific process introduced and clients’ personal preferences for using art for self-expression” (Malchiodi, 2012, p. 29).

During this first session, Group 2’s project was splatter painting. Group members prepared two pieces of paper adhered to cardboard as a diptych and provided different cups or bottles filled with watered-down paint. The focus of their art-making project was to elicit two emotions and work with the participants to express these emotions by splattering color.

Group 3 decided on a unit theme of expression through color and collage. “Images and image formation, whether mental images or those drawn on paper, are important in all art therapy practice because through art making participants are invited to reframe how they feel, respond to an event or experience, and work on emotional and behavioral change” (Malchiodi, 2012, p. 18). Group 3’s art-making lesson allowed participants to actively try out, experiment with, respond to, and rehearse a desired emotional and/or behavioral change, event, or experience through collage, which involved a tangible object that was physically altered.

Since Session 1 took place shortly before Valentine’s Day, Group 3 based the first lesson on the creation of Valentine boxes and cards made with the collage technique. They provided shoeboxes, a variety of colored paper, scrapbooking stickers, and glue sticks. They began by teaching the history of Valentine’s Day and discussing color and collage. Participants were pleased with being able to make the Valentine’s Day cards and then give them to one another and family members. They were proud of their accomplishment and showed off their boxes to everyone in the facility.

**Session 2.** Group 1’s lesson for the second session was a mix of both fluid and resistive materials in 2D form. They began by using colored pencils and markers, and then participants used melted crayons to add wax to their artwork. Again, the idea was for participants to be inspired by a mix of music that was playing while they created art.

Group 2’s lesson for the second session was called the Tree Bark Project. The group taught color theory and had color theory charts at each table for participants’ reference. The lesson was designed to guide participants to make art using colors based on their mood. Participants could use watercolors to paint their paper with any

color based on their mood; then they designed, drew, and cut out trees that were adhered to the painted piece of paper.

Group 3's lesson was another color and collage project but this time, participants wrote their names on transparent paper that adhered to a window or glass pane. Participants used colored tissue paper to collage their name so that when hung on a window, it gave a stained-glass effect.

**Session 3.** For Session 3, students continued with their unit themes and created different art lessons based on these themes. Group 1 switched from fluid, 2D materials to resistive, 3D materials using clay. In Group 2's project, participants drew their initials over a painted background, outlined their initials with pins, then wove string or yarn around the pins to create a web. Group 3 continued using color and collage but with more traditional media. Participants created collages using images and text from magazines.

## Volunteering

In order to build rapport and relationships with participants at the CAPC, students spent 10 hours on volunteer contact outside the course schedule. The three art-making sessions were intended to facilitate interaction, help students test theoretical concepts and strategies, and promote examples of teaching and learning. However, "communities are well-developed, complex entities that must be understood and accepted rather than required to adapt to university culture" (*Kellett & Goldstein, 1999, p. 32*). During the volunteer time, therefore, students were to focus on building relationships in order to better understand participants and the organization and feel the "soul of the community" (*Lima, 2013, p. 88*). It was hoped that they would become deeply involved in the community and that rather than finding the time boring, they would want to repeat the experience outside class.

Initially, students were not enthusiastic about the 10 hours; however, at the end of the semester, the outside-class hours resulted in some of the best work. Without much direction, students collaborated on several projects. Certain students took leadership positions to rally other students together to work on bigger, more collaborative outcomes. The three main projects in which almost all students participated were a quilt project, making paper bag puppets, and a graffiti wall.

The graffiti wall surprised everyone who was involved. It was a massive project that continued for weeks, and the CAPC leadership as well as participants raved about the end result. The graf-

fiti wall was initiated in the facility as a place where participants could openly paint to express emotions, share daily occurrences, or communicate whatever they were feeling. With the assistance of two other students, one student developed the initial concept, but the entire class participated in the project at least once. At first, the students did not believe that the CAPC leadership would allow them to paint on a wall in the facility. However, when the students discussed the idea with them, the leaders were excited about the concept. A group of students collaborated with participants to set up the wall by taping it off, writing rules and inspirational sayings at the top, painting the background with different colors, and initiating the graffiti. After this start, others joined in with their own artwork, text, and ideas. Throughout the semester, different groups of students used their volunteer hours to open the wall and paint with participants. The wall continuously morphed and changed over time.

With the many changes and people painting over the artwork of others, some had difficulty letting go of previously painted sections. One of the CAPC leaders commented many times that she felt sad when something was painted over. The students' intention from the beginning, however, had been for the wall to change, morph, and evolve. The wall was based on the idea of letting go and not becoming attached to any one image or artwork. After some time, CAPC leaders and participants enjoyed the act of painting over past works and made many comments about liking the evolution of the wall (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The graffiti wall, students, and participants who worked together to create the artwork.

## Reflections and Questionnaires

Students were required to complete four reflections, one for each art-making session and one for the 10 hours of volunteer time. These reflections offered much information about changes in perception, although the prompts were not directly about perception. All but one student indicated an increase in satisfaction with the service-learning project as time progressed throughout the semester. From the first reflection, which revolved around how fearful, anxious, and nervous students were at the outset, to the final reflection, which described not wanting to stop working at the CAPC, making great friendships, and enjoying the experience immensely, it became apparent that there was strong agreement about the value of the service-learning. Overall, the reflections indicated changes of perception regarding levels of personal anxiety, knowledge about people with developmental disabilities, leadership development, self-confidence, and relationship building. The following student reflection quotes are indicative of these perception changes:

“I was beyond nervous about working with special needs adults the first time we went there... Once we started spending time with the people there and getting to know them, it’s hard to imagine there was ever anything to be afraid of in the first place. Nearly everyone I’ve met there seems to truly enjoy having the opportunity to create art and finding an outlet to express themselves. They’re also just genuinely nice people who [are] always ready to give you a hug and ask how you’re doing. I definitely plan on spending more time volunteering there in the future, because it’s a fantastic way to help enrich the lives of others as well as your own.”

“As scared and nervous as I was at the beginning, the time I spent at the CAPC was refreshing, educational, and fun. The people there were amazing and having made friends with some of them made me feel special. The smiles on their faces when we walked in made me feel like a celebrity. The time I spent at the CAPC was a priceless learning and teaching experience. If I have the chance, I’d like to visit next semester as well and catch up with my new friends Nathan and Maria.”

“Service-learning is a humble experience, and every time we go we get to help our community. It is very rewarding seeing how much they appreciate us being there and having the opportunity working with them. I hope that I will be able to go back and work with them, as well as being able to collaborate with my classmates makes this experience better. I definitely do plan to keep helping out at the CAPC when given the chance, as well as to get more involved in my community.”

“This time has opened up my eyes to another world that I want to take more time to learn about and see what other ways that I can give my time. I have always wanted to do something with the mentally disabled but I don’t know if I would have ever had the courage to pursue this without having spent this time with the people at Evergreen.”

Most responses from the reflections were similar to these four short examples in illustrating an increased awareness about and better knowledge of the developmentally disabled community, expressing an interest in repeating the experience, and continuing to work with people through the arts. All students mentioned their progress in teaching art, understanding concepts, reworking ideas, reflecting and making their practice better throughout the semester, and learning how to better facilitate working with people with disabilities. The majority of responses suggested greater civic-mindedness after the service-learning experience. Many students wrote that they wanted to return, wanted to become more involved in their communities, and wanted the good feelings that came from teaching art in the CAPC community.

## **Pretest/Posttest Questionnaires**

Pretest and posttest questionnaires were administered to the students at the beginning and end of the semester to examine changes in their perceptions regarding service-learning, the socially and culturally diverse contexts of art programs, the benefits of teaching the arts to others, and their civic-mindedness.

**Demographics.** There were 18 students in the course: 16 females and two males. Eight students were aged 18 to 22, six were aged 23 to 27, two were aged 28 to 32, and two were aged 33 to 42.

Ten students were Caucasian, seven were Hispanic, and one was Asian American.

**Pretest/Posttest Comparison.** After responding to general demographic questions, students provided responses to a set of questions (Questions 13–28) that were based on agreement levels about perception changes. The questions were drafted to produce responses regarding the students' civic engagement, guided by Driscoll et al.'s (1998) model of student variables and indicators, and to address the overall research goals. The questions were the same for both the pretest and posttest questionnaires except that the latter did not require preassessment demographic information. The questionnaires used a Likert scale where 1= *strongly disagree*, 2= *disagree*, 3= *neutral*, 4= *agree*, and 5= *strongly agree*.

One of the questions on the pretest questionnaire inquired, "How would you describe your level of community service/volunteer involvement during the last 4 years?" The majority of students responded "sometimes" or "rarely" involved. One student responded as "very" involved, and three students said they were "never" involved. This question provided insight into the students' amount of community service involvement before taking the course and provided a preassessment of students working in their communities before the project. This, however, did not indicate their level of service-learning experience because the question was inquiring about general community service. In class, most of the students acknowledged that if they were involved at all, it was through their church. Example questions in the form of statements with which students could agree or disagree included the following:

- I know that I can make a difference in the lives of others.
- I have a civic responsibility to become involved in my community.
- I am very likely to participate regularly in community service/volunteer activities in the future.
- I am likely to understand better my preconceived notions of diverse teaching settings (such as stereotypes).
- I will become aware of appropriate art teaching strategies (in diverse contexts) of community arts programs.
- I will very likely have a better understanding of how arts activities benefit others.

- I will very likely feel that I have made a difference for someone else.
- I will very likely become more civically minded and engaged.
- I will very likely better understand the value of the arts to others.

Using the 5-point Likert scale, corresponding numbers of the responses were averaged. Averaged responses were examined to better understand whether agreement levels would change from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester after completion of the arts-based service-learning project. These averages do not constitute the type of strong evidence produced by statistical analysis to better understand significance; however, this pilot study was performed with limited resources and time. Most agreement levels increased for the posttest, which indicated that students' perceptions had changed positively (see Figure 2). However, for five questions of 15 total, average agreement levels remained the same, reflected decreased interest for the posttest, or interest levels barely increased indicating a small perception change or lessened interest or enthusiasm. Since these five questions were the outliers, where average agreement levels did not increase, a discussion is appropriate.

### Comparison between Pretest and Posttest

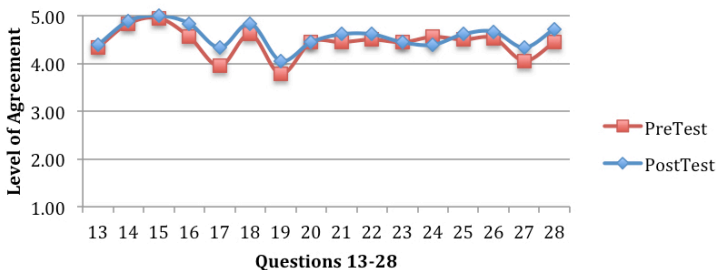


Figure 2. Comparison of pretest and posttest questionnaires.

Two questions probed students' thoughts about their choice of major and their success in college. These were: "I am very certain of my choice for my undergraduate major" and "I am very confident of my ability to succeed in college." The questions were intended to determine whether the service-learning experience might solidify



students' choice of major and confidence in succeeding in school. The agreement levels increased slightly from pretest to posttest. This might mean that the experience did not influence students' feelings about major and success with or without the service-learning experience. Statistical analysis of responses might indicate that there was no effect at all.

Two other questions showed no difference between the pretest and posttest responses. One said, "I will better understand diverse contexts (spaces and environments) while teaching art." The other said, "I will become aware of appropriate art teaching strategies (in diverse contexts) of community arts programs." Although overall agreement level was high, averaging 4.44 out of 5 for both questions, the responses did not change from the beginning of the semester to the end. A fifth said, "I will better understand art education course concepts and theories (those related to service-learning, art therapy, developmental disabilities, and teaching and learning)." Although overall the agreement levels were high, students' average agreement level for this question decreased, averaging 4.5 pretest and 4.39 posttest.

Three of these questions were important indicators for the overall goal of this project, which was to ascertain whether students might consider service-learning an experience that facilitates understanding diverse contexts, awareness of appropriate teaching strategies, and understanding art education course concepts and theories. That these agreement levels remained the same or decreased was disappointing. Even though they did not increase from pretest to posttest, the agreement levels were in the high range, from 4 to 5. Agreement levels for all other questions (of questions 13 through 28) increased on the posttest questionnaire. There was only one question that elicited a decrease in agreement level out of 16 total questions. Although this question on the posttest resulted in a decreased agreement level in regard to a better understanding of course concepts and theories, it is difficult to fully understand why. Perhaps students' experiences did not connect to course concepts and theories as hoped or perhaps, due to not using statistical analysis, a full picture of whether the responses were significant cannot be identified. The reflections suggest another outcome.

Figure 3 shows individual students' overall average responses. All but four students' level of agreement increased throughout the semester, and all students' agreement levels were in the 4 to 5 range. This may indicate that the majority of students had a positive experience and thought that service-learning was valuable in their art



education course. This figure reflects that the majority of students' perceptions changed positively throughout the experience.

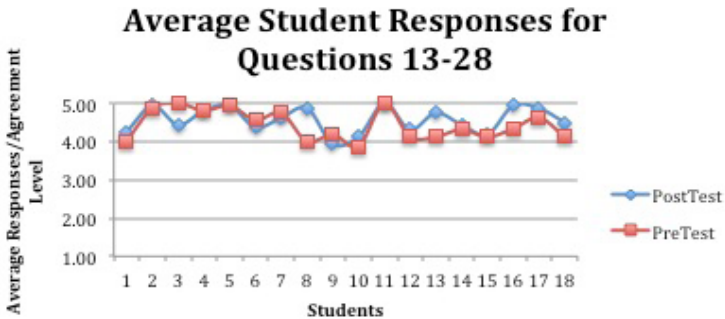


Figure 3. Average agreement level for each student for questions 13–28.

## Arts-Based Service-Learning Project Outcomes and Implications

The pretest and posttest questionnaires evolved from Driscoll et al.'s (1998) model of student variables and indicators to assess student changes from, perceptions of, and learning in a service-learning course. The questions were based on the 11 variables in Table 1. Responses to both the questionnaires and reflections can be examined using these variables and indicators. In addition, a large part of my understanding of students' changes and perceptions was achieved through observing and examining the art-making sessions. The points below, which reflect a synthesis of outcomes from questionnaires, reflections, and observations of the art-making sessions, indicate increased civic-mindedness.

### Awareness of and Involvement With the Community

Students showed an increase in awareness when working with the developmentally disabled population after coming to terms with their anxiety. They showed knowledge of the community's history, gained a grasp of the participants' strengths and weaknesses, and could better define a range of developmental disabilities. They connected to the population through teaching art, grasped "the soul" of the community, and learned about people whose experiences and backgrounds were different from theirs. Their interactions and attitudes toward this community were predominantly positive.

## **Commitment to Service**

Commitment to service was best observed at the end of the semester, when the majority of students wanted to continue working at the facility teaching art after the semester ended. In the questionnaire, students indicated a more favorable awareness of long-term civic engagement, stating that they were more likely to participate regularly in community service/volunteer work in their communities after having participated in the service-learning project. A couple of students continued art-making workshops at the CAPC after the completion of the course.

## **Academic Achievement, Career Choice, and Development**

Students were able to practice what they had learned in class by reflecting, refining, and (re)teaching the material. It was an invaluable experience for students to learn whether their units/lessons were appropriate for the audience, if their themes were engaging, and if they could make needed adjustments to the curriculum—all part of the theoretical development and strategies that they will use when they have their own art classrooms. Some students developed skills and interests that contributed to a clearer career path. After the arts-based service-learning program, many students inquired about graduate school to study art therapy and working for community nonprofit organizations.

## **Self-Awareness and Personal Development**

Through the project, students learned more about themselves, developing confidence, clarifying their values, and realizing their capacity to give and develop patience and compassion. They could also see how their presence benefited and made a difference for a disabled population. Most students acknowledged a sense of importance in regard to their actions during the experience and discussed understanding that importance with future community connections. By the end of the semester, students also showed an increase in competence and efficacy. A few students took on leadership roles and developed those skills throughout the course. The questionnaires and reflections demonstrated that students were compelled to believe that they could bring about change and become civically responsible, and that they had a moral obligation to their communities.

## **Sensitivity to Diversity**

Working with the developmentally disabled, students had a chance to teach art in a different social and cultural context. The experience opened their eyes to being more sensitive to people's needs and to understanding different learning styles and contexts. At the end of the semester, students showed increased awareness of social issues involving the developmentally disabled as well as more positive attitudes toward this population. Students also evidenced increased comfort and confidence in dealing with the developmentally disabled by the end of the semester.

## **Autonomy and Independence, Sense of Ownership, and Empowerment**

Some students developed leadership skills and confidence when working at the CAPC. The entire class, with little guidance, was able to come together and bring about several art-making projects including the graffiti wall, over which they took full ownership. Many students took on extra duties without being asked and developed future ideas for art making at the CAPC.

## **Communication Skills**

After the initial art-making session, students felt a reduction in anxiety around people with developmental disabilities. Many students had never interacted with people with disabilities and were not sure how to communicate with them. As time progressed, students appeared to become more at ease and were quickly developing their communication skills. Each visit during the art-making sessions brought better preparedness and more capability in teaching art. It is important for art teachers to understand adults and children with developmental disabilities because in most schools, art classes include significant numbers of youth with disabilities.

## **Critical Thinking and Analysis**

The reflections reveal that students were able to adjust and think about their teaching in various ways. However, it was not evident that students thought more critically about issues of social justice. They did not explicitly entertain thoughts that connected the situation of developmentally disabled people with political solutions, nor did they mention taking what they learned to service abroad, an approach that would contribute to developing a global awareness of various social justice issues.

## Discussion

A principal limitation of the study was the rather small number of students ( $n = 18$ ) and the limited duration of the experimental treatment. The study was essentially a pilot with limited statistical analysis. The qualitative measures implicit in the reflections supported the goals of the project. However, the statistical design limitations could serve as a starting point for redesigning the research. Overall, more data, replication, and statistical analysis of the project are needed. Another design also might involve reconsidering the mixed method approach.

Moving forward, the arts-based service-learning project will continue, and data will be collected from students. The results of this pilot study allow reflection on how to improve data collection and analysis. First, the topics and goals might lend themselves best to a solely qualitative approach without the quantitative analysis of questionnaires. If the qualitative results strongly indicate that the students perceive their experience as contributing to established goals, that is an important result requiring no additional statistical confirmation.

Creating a dynamic in the course so that students better understand the connections between art education content and the service-learning project is also important. As seen when analyzing questions from the questionnaires, students are not making all the connections the course is meant to convey.

Third, challenging students to an increased awareness of social justice issues in a critical and thorough manner is essential. Although the guiding research goals did not use the term *social justice*, the connections between art education, service-learning, and social justice are vital. The guiding research goals were inherently intertwined with social justice concepts through the variables and indicators used; however, it may be necessary to revise the research goals to indicate a stronger connection to social justice. Understanding social justice is most likely something that students are learning by example—by observing their instructor facilitating community partnerships, posing problem-solving questions, relating content materials, and interacting with and working alongside students in community settings. Exploring ways to capture this information and creating strategies and models will help art teachers and professors in their own classrooms and arts-based service-learning projects.

Data provided examples of ways in which students showed positive perception changes with each variable; however, working

on in-class discussions and pushing the reflection questions to revolve around more in-depth social justice issues may increase students' understanding and perceptions to another level. Cipolle (2010) outlined a set of reflection prompts that she called "navigating the stages of white critical-consciousness development" (p. 58), which encourages students of any race to expand their perspectives of social justice. Cipolle's prompts will be used in further research instead of the widely known service-learning reflection prompts: What? So what? Now what? (Kolb, 1984). Additionally, a more thorough analysis of reflection responses will be explored.

If the pretest and posttest questionnaires remain a part of the research, some questions could be eliminated and others added. This might result in a more fruitful understanding of students' social justice awareness and perception changes. For example, the questions referring to career and choice of degree might not be as useful as those posed in Cipolle's (2010) literature that refer to social justice and political and/or global awareness.

In the future, looking at the benefits to the developmentally disabled population will also paint a clearer picture of the overall project. Ideas to further the research design in this manner include requesting that the CAPC leadership participate in the research. They could observe and document the benefits through photography, testimonials, and visiting our class to discuss happenings after each art-making session. These sessions would be audio recorded. The leaders might collect the photos and vignettes into a scrapbook of sorts showing the stories and information that they acknowledge as important to their clients and organization. Questions that might be put to CAPC leadership include the following: How do the CAPC participants perceive the students? How do they benefit from this project? What is the value of such benefits? What are the pitfalls to participation? What type of assessment is desirable for the long-term adoption of such programs?

## Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the data collected through questionnaires, reflection responses, and art-making session observations suggest that the arts-based service-learning project provided a positive experience for preservice art teachers (i.e., the students in this study). The research indicated that most students learned more about teaching art in a socially and culturally different context and could identify the benefits of teaching arts to others. Students also seemed to gain a better understanding of civic-minded issues. In

addition, they demonstrated their ability to apply the course concepts they had learned.

This program with promise and research is presented to stand as a model for other researchers, arts and community leaders, administrators, and educators who would like to implement service-learning with students in an arts-based organization or an agency for people with developmental disabilities. Although based on a limited pilot study, the model provides a starting point for preservice art educators who are eager and could learn much from applying course concepts in various ways within a community setting.

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