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# I'm So Glad I Said Yes: Connecting Two Communities Through Photography

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### *I'm so glad I said yes: Connecting two communities through photography*

Dr. Mary Wolf

*Taking your teaching and student learning outside the classroom is a daunting task – involving much more time and preparation than a “normal” learning unit takes, with the predictable planning and management processes of the controlled classroom space. Dr. Mary Wolf and her student collaborators – well aware of the challenges service learning opportunities presented – went ahead and embraced the difficulties and complications. They were determined to be positive, and their efforts were rewarded in many ways. Dr. Wolf’s yearly projects with local school children, led by her college students, prove that community service is a two way street – a sense of personal accomplishment and interpersonal connection is deeply felt on both sides.*

For Christmas, I was given a red “NO!” button that looks like the Staples “EASY” button you see in television commercials. Like many art educators, I have a hard time saying no. So when my colleague, Cheryl Bird, asked me if my art education majors and I would offer an art class to middle school students in an after-school program for underprivileged youth, I obviously said yes. Melody Milbrandt (2013), 2015 NAEA Teacher of the Year and prolific author on the subject of teaching art, has said that “research and literature surrounding urban teacher preparation reveals that there is often a cultural and socioeconomic mismatch between the majority of teachers in training and their future urban students” (p. 157). I felt this collaboration might be a good step toward connecting my college students with some local urban students. Also, my college (Daemen) collaborates with the Seneca Street Community Development Corporation, a not-for-profit organization that runs the drop-in program at the Seneca Street Church providing students a safe place for them to go after school to do homework and participate in a variety of arts and other activities.

I am not going to lie to you; the program was a bit unruly—meaning the site administrators did not really have specific rules for the children to follow. As a public school teacher for ten years with set rules and schedules, I realized this might be a little more challenging than I originally thought. I was concerned but still pretty sure I was glad I said yes.

Though I thought I was agreeing to volunteer for one year, you will see it turned into a multi-year project. Each year we worked with 10-15 elementary and middle school students from the Seneca Babcock community of South Buffalo. The children attend a variety of public and charter schools. Some signed up for our class one year and others two, three, and four years. We worked with many of the children over the five-year collaboration. You will see each year that I was glad I said yes!

**Year 1:** My six art education majors were tasked to develop an art course they could teach and decided to make altered books with the children. Each week, a different college student introduced a new medium and problem for the students to solve creatively in an old, reused book. We figured this would be beneficial for a transient group of students because if they missed a class they just would not have that project in their book but could still do the others. However, the six-week program was lackluster and the children did not seem excited nor did they behave long enough to make any quality work. My college students learned a lot about classroom management. Even after teaching at an alternative middle and high school for several years, I struggled to keep the youngsters engaged. When it was all over, we did not think the students wanted us back—but they did and we were asked us to do it again the next year and I said yes!

## Year 2 Photos:



**Year 2:** After reading *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sherican, 2013), my art education volunteer Shannon G. and I considered ways to help the children engage, persist, building craft, and understand the art world. Taking a more student-centered approach, we asked the children what they wanted to do rather than having a pre-determined lesson ready. The unanimous answer was photography. Since we did not have any cameras, we applied for and received a generous grant from our college to buy cameras and supplies. We focused on one medium (photography) and one big idea for the entire project. Walker (2001) explains big ideas as “broad, important human issues...characterized by complexity, ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity” (p. 1). Our big idea was *How People Perceive Our Community*. We felt this big idea was authentic and significant for students who could make real-world connections between their community and their art (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) and hoped if we taught children how “place, upbringing, and life experiences influence artists,” (Congdon, 2004, p. 44) they too could be inspired to make art about their community.

I was surprised when the students remembered me from the previous year and greeted us with hugs and an overwhelming excitement about the class. Instead of teaching art or handing out cameras on Day 1, we showed them clips from the documentary *Wasteland* and photographs of Vik Muniz's work from that time. His artwork inspired a discussion about how art can challenge and change people's perceptions about other people and places. We asked them, “How do you think outsiders perceive this community?” “Like you?” several replied. “Yes, like us.” Students listed many negative traits such as drugs, litter, violence, stealing, fighting, and speeding cars. Then we encouraged them to think of positive ones as well. Slowly and then more quickly and with more excitement came answers, which included decorated front yards, caring neighbors, fun friends, decorative trashcans, the after-school program, the playgrounds, and a great corner store with friendly owners. We added the students' names explaining they were positive attributes of their community, too. We discussed how the Seneca Babcock community was similar to and different than the ones we grew up in and our college community. We realized that “Every community has history that is cause for celebration, and history that is shameful or regrettable in some way” (Congdon, 2004, p. 44). As we communicated in meaningful ways, our class community began to grow in trust and understanding. I saw what Milbrandt (2013) meant when she stated:

When they genuinely listen to one another, people typically develop respect, understanding and tolerance for others. As pre-service teachers interact with urban youth during art experiences, new ideas and identities are constructed that are authentic and empowering rather than stereotypical and oppressive. (p.158)

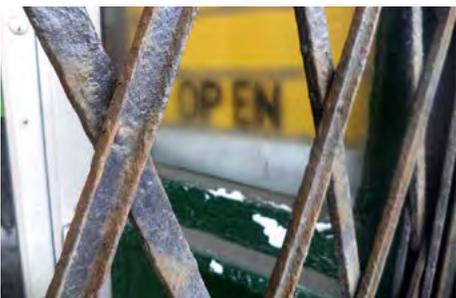
We taught students about the parts of the camera and several strategies for taking *artistic photographs* rather than just quickly snapped selfies. We initially questioned whether or not we should give these energetic youngsters hundreds of dollars worth of equipment but since they were engaged, interested, eager to listen, and excited to learn and work—we said yes and allowed them full use of the cameras. We were glad we did! The first assignment began cautiously with an in-door photo treasure hunt for them to complete. They had to follow some rules regarding behavior and use the strategies we taught them to record reflections, shadows, textures, and other artistic concepts while purposefully choosing their compositions. As they practiced and reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of their photos, their excitement, photographs, and behaviors improved.

We were still a little nervous taking them out into a community we were unfamiliar with, but quickly felt more comfortable as they introduced us to person after person we encountered on the street. Clearly this was a more tightly knit community than we had perceived. When we challenged them to showcase their

### Year 3 Photos:



### Year 4 Photos



community in a positive light, they took the challenge seriously using the strategies we taught them to zoom in and out, using light in unique ways, creating interesting angles and intriguing compositions. After being so impressed with their progress and photographs, we asked the children if they would like to have a photo show/sale at the church and the college—they said yes! We helped students choose photographs to exhibit and each student had a foam core board decorated with their names and photographs. The Seneca Street CDC invited local stakeholders and community members and we invited the college community to each show/sale. The children proudly stood in front of their photographs wearing Daemen t-shirts and we could not have been more proud as their teachers. They raised over \$400 for their after-school program. One girl asked if Daemen had photography because she wanted to go to college for it. We were all glad we said yes!

**Year 3:** Since the photo program was so successful, many elementary school students asked if they could participate—my new art education major volunteers Kathryn H., Rebecca H., and Emily Y., and I said yes! That year's big idea was *Making the Ordinary Extraordinary*. Children analyzed photographer, Jay Maisel's work and their own and their peers' photos from the prior year identifying ways each photographer made their photographs extraordinary. Again, we taught them about the parts of the camera and various strategies to ensure artistic photographs. During their indoor photo treasure hunt and on our outdoor photo shoot, the students were eager to show barely recognizable images that highlighted lines, shapes, textures, etc. and challenged us to guess what was in the photograph. They were clearly observing their environments closely and making observations more closely too. They were equally excited to share their photographs at our second annual photo show/sale. Our Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Michael Brogan, was popular with the young photographers, not only for providing the funds for the project each year but because he spoke with and purchased a photograph from each student. One boy ran up to me and exclaimed, "I killed it, Ms. Mary!" I responded, "What did you kill?" While pointing to Dr. Brogan he said, "I killed it with the man in the suit, I told him everything we learned!" We were all glad we said yes!

**Year 4:** My new art education volunteer, Sam L., and I decided it was time to introduce a female photographer. We shared the surprising story of Vivian Meier, who in her lifetime was known for her job as a nanny but after her death gained recognition as a world-class photographer. Students were shocked to learn she did not receive recognition for her photographs until after her death. We discussed the importance of artists showing and selling their work and used the big idea of being *Not-So-Secret Photographers*. Inspired by the new National Core Arts Standard of *Presenting*, we used the show/sale as motivation and a goal for students to work toward more than we had in the past. Students had further instruction and another treasure hunt before venturing out into the community to take photographs. During the last class, we modeled and practiced how students could respectfully introduce themselves to patrons, make them feel comfortable, and invite them over to discuss their photographs. We chuckled every time a student reached out their hand to someone, saying, "Hi I'm \_\_\_\_\_. Can I show you my photographs? They are for sale!" Our regulars like Mr. Rick, from maintenance and Mr. Donald from security were our most popular patrons. But it was the numerous comments about the "little photographers" who could really "sell" their work, from newcomers who vowed to become regulars, which said it all. We were all glad we said yes!

**Year 5:** Trying to think of ways to improve the photo project, I asked Sam L. if she wanted to take the kids on a field trip—and she said yes! The new big idea was *Up Close with Nature: Noticing the Unnoticed*. Children analyzed the work of Ansel Adams, learned about macrophotography, and engaged in another treasure hunt before going outside to get up close with nature. They sat on the ground, climbed trees, and crawled on sidewalks carefully observing their environments, capturing just the right shots. Their observation, engagement, persistence, reflections, understanding of the art world, development of craft (Hetland et al., 2013) and behavior continued to improve and impress.

## Year 5 Photos



Dr. Wolf has taught art at all levels and in a variety of settings including elementary, middle, and high school, as well as alternative, adult, and higher education settings. Her research interests include creating community in the classroom to improve student development, community art education, teacher education, arts integration and professional development for arts educators.

Sam L. planned a field trip to Buffalo Botanical Gardens, arranged transportation, admissions, and learned that a carefully organized field trip is a lot to manage. She figured she would arrive to get the students and they would be excited but instead she texted me that they were arguing and refusing to go. I was not there so it was up to Sam to motivate them. I asked, "Can you do it?" And she said yes! When they met me at the gardens, the students apologized and we could not believe how quickly their behaviors and attitudes changed as they took photo after photo. One girl asked to take us to a nearby tree where her and her mother come for quality time together—and we said yes! The branches of the tree flowed down to the ground providing a secret sanctuary for us to climb into and talk as a group. Another student asked to take us into the nearby woods where he also spent time biking with friends—and once again we said yes! This unexpected time together created a stronger sense of community (Wolf, 2010) among us. That year they looked forward to seeing our most supportive patron at the photo show/sale – NYSATA Region 1 president, Michelle Schroeder, who year-after-year talked with all of the students about their photos. One middle school girl ran over to tell us, "The important lady said I should go to the arts academy. Do you think I can?" The pride in her eyes, mirrored in Sam's and mine. I'm so glad we all said yes!

By putting theory into practice, my art education majors learned the importance of "emphasizing the connections between art education and life" and creating "meaning and deep learning through a thematic comprehensive approach" (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005 p. 24) focused on big ideas (Walker, 2001). My students learned to engage younger learners, develop persistence, craft, observation and reflection skills, and a deeper understanding of the art world (Hetland et al., 2013). Like Wendy Ewald's (2001) *Literacy through Photography* program, our photo project helped "children put what they see into a form that communicates their concerns to people who know nothing about them" (p. 145) in a way that bridged the gaps between these children and their community and my students, me, and our college community. I don't plan on using my "NO!" button much in 2017 because when you say yes, great things happen. And yes, they asked us to return—and we said yes!

Dr. Wolf thanks Samantha L., Kathryn H., Rebecca H., Emily Y., Shannon G., Daemen College, the Seneca Street CDC, and the children of the Seneca Babcock Community for the teaching and learning experience, and help with this article.

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