Finding Solace To Create: The Significance Of Developing Safe Space In A Community Art Classroom

Encontrando la comodidad para crear: La importancia de desarrollar espacios seguros en cursos comunitarios de arte.

Jennifer Wicks
Concordia University, Montréal Québec, Canada
jennifer.wicks@concordia.ca

Abstract

Addressing the issue of teaching art, teacher's training and artistic research by looking at innovative art teaching strategies, this paper explores the importance of developing safe space in the art classroom as a method to enhance students' art practice. The qualitative artistic research project presented is based on a case study, using grounded theory and action research, which was conducted over a five-week period in an art class with women who have recently experienced homelessness, and are now living in a housing reintegration facility in Montreal, Quebec. Through the course of a five week art class, collecting data through focus groups, photographs, artwork, field notes and journal entries, I examined safety as a psychological construct and outlined methods educators could use to build an environment where students could feel secure, allowing the space to be creative and genuine, have fun and produce meaningful artworks. The art student participants worked with dye, fabric paint, embroidery and created their own stencils, producing substantial fibers-based art works, inspired by both traditional and contemporary artists working with similar techniques and media.

This research examines the relationships between students and teacher, student interaction, pedagogical techniques, such as preferred motivational tools and demonstrations, curriculum building with student input, approaches to building community within the classroom, teaching approaches, and teacher values and characteristics. This study substantiates that by consciously developing an atmosphere conducive to creativity in our classrooms, community art educators can help to reduce performance-based anxiety in students, and facilitate an increased creative thought process.

Key words
Community art education, safe space, teaching practice, art making

Extended Abstract in Spanish

En centros comunitarios las clases de arte ofrecen un ambiente de aprendizaje diverso y complejo. Mi experiencia como profesora de arte en dichos espacios me ha enseñado que muchos de mis estudiantes no se consideran a sí mismos artistas, y usualmente toman estas clases como un pasatiempo, impulsados por su interés y apreciación hacia las artes. Su quehacer artístico usualmente es tímido, inseguro y reservado. Buscando estrategias para generar seguridad entre mis estudiantes, intento ofrecerles instrucción técnica y consejos que aumenten su confianza en sus esfuerzos artísticos y, al mismo tiempo, proveerles un espacio o ambiente donde se puedan sentir lo suficientemente cómodos para dejar ir muchas de sus inhibiciones artísticas, haciendo posible la creación de trabajos honestos, sin miedo a reprimirse.

En el siguiente caso de estudio, examinaré el concepto de seguridad como una construcción psicológica y explicaré qué métodos pueden ser utilizados por los educadores para crear un ambiente en el cual los estudiantes se sientan lo suficientemente seguros para ser creativos y originales mientras se divierten aprendiendo diversas técnicas artísticas. Al discutir el concepto de espacio seguro, no me refiero a una seguridad física, pero una seguridad psicológica, espacial y emocional. Esta noción de espacio seguro fue explorada con mis estudiantes en términos de confianza y comodidad, entre los propios estudiantes, y entre estudiantes y profesora.

Esta investigación fue desarrollada durante un curso de arte de cinco semanas en el Lise Watier Pavillion, una casa de reintegración social para mujeres adultas de todas las edades, las cuales han experimentado indigencia recientemente en Montreal, Canadá. Se les pidió a las estudiantes que reflexionaran sobre sus niveles de confort en el ambiente de clase y el efecto que estos tenían en su proceso creativo. En grupos de discusión formados después de cada clase, las estudiantes ofrecieron sugerencias sobre cómo mejorar el ambiente de clase, las cuales implementé en las semanas subsecuentes.

Escogí trabajar con mujeres que ya estaban incorporadas al programa de arte existente en el albergue Lise Watier Pavilion porque identifiqué gran potencial en su ya desarrollada práctica artística, pero a su vez sentí que estaban siendo limitadas por la falta de confianza y seguridad en sí mismas y como grupo. Al invitar a todas estas mujeres a contribuir a depurar nuestro programa de arte, esperaba aumentar su influencia en el espacio y de esta manera, aumentar también su confianza y bienestar.

La noción de espacio seguro ha sido estudiada a través de muchas facetas de la educación, y se ha centrado usualmente en minorías o grupos de riesgo, como mujeres, lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transexuales y queer (LGBTQ), gente de color, y/o gente que proviene de ambientes poco privilegiados. (Batsleer, 2008; hooks, 1989; Holley& Steiner, 2005; Toynton, 2006; Al-Amin & Nasir, 2006; Fox, 2007). Si bien existen algunos estudios realizados en ambientes artísticos (Hunter, 2008; Yerichuk, 2010), ninguno se refiere a un contexto artístico basado en un ámbito comunitario.

Aunque los educadores no puedan observar o fortalecer estados interpersonales, si tienen la capacidad de influenciar el comportamiento del estudiante en la clase, tanto como docentes y como modelos de civilidad. Yerichuk (2010) expone que "el aprendizaje más profundo ocurre cuando la seguridad está protegida pero una medida de incomodidad está presente."(p.21.) Yerichuk propone tres estrategias para acercarse a un espacio seguro más imparcial: 1) contextualizar materiales; 2) crear una práctica más auto-reflexiva; y 3) cambiar el foco de aprendizaje individual a aprendizaje colectivo en el salón de clases (p.23).

Antecedentes:

Enseñar arte como parte de un programa del centro de rehabilitación para indigentes constituye un ambiente muy particular, ya que existen varios elementos que nos distingue de otros programas artísticos de acción social dirigidos a la educación. Usualmente, las mujeres indigentes han sido víctimas de abuso doméstico y/o violencia, además muchas sufren alguna enfermedad mental o lidin con problemas de abuso de sustancias (Hagen, 1987). El proceso de reintegración puede ser muy complejo y, para muchas de ellas, la soledad y el aislamiento social puede ser un verdadero problema (Tosi, 2005). Para algunas estudiantes, el programa de arte sirve como un tipo de evento social, como una oportunidad de hacer conexión con gente afuera de su círculo social en el albergue. Algunas de las participantes en la clase de arte expresaron que atendían la clase de arte por el aspecto social y la interacción dentro del aula o, simplemente, para interactuar conmigo como su instructora.

Metodología

Basándome en el concepto de investigación-acción participativa (IAP), examiné las ideas de espacio seguro y sus efectos en el proceso de crear arte. La investigación se desarrolla en base a tres preguntas:

- ¿Qué es un espacio seguro?
- ¿Por qué los espacios seguros son importantes?
- ¿Cómo puedo yo, en mi labor como educadora comunitaria, crear espacios seguros en mi salón de clases?

Incluir el aporte de mis estudiantes en el curso de mi investigación me permitió alcanzar una percepción más holística de mi salón de clases, realizando una práctica reflexiva e implementando las sugerencias de mis estudiantes acerca de mi labor docente.

Desarrollo de la Atmosfera

A través de este estudio, hice un esfuerzo por cambiar los tipos de materiales motivacionales que introducía al salón de clases, desde fotocopias, a libros, videos y obras de arte. Las opiniones de las estudiantes acerca de la variedad de materiales que les presenté fueron consistentes. Preferían los libros a las fotocopias, y encontraron los videos informativos y motivadores. Además, expresaron su aprecio por las demostraciones físicas de arte pues las encontraron educativas y de gran ayuda, siendo estas piezas claves para el éxito de las estudiantes en los talleres realizados esos mismos días.

En una oportunidad, les presenté mi propio proyecto artístico, un proyecto con un mantel acompañado de una pieza audiovisual que documentaba mi propio proceso a la hora de crear arte. Aunque no correspondía exactamente a lo que ellas estaban realizando en el aula, la temática era similar y la base del proyecto era la misma: un mantel. Mi intención era aumentar el nivel de intimidad del grupo, y crear un lazo entre las estudiantes y yo, y a su vez, demostrar la importancia de crear arte significativo en un proyecto a largo plazo.

Las estudiantes reaccionaron de varias maneras, expresando su aprecio por la exposición de mi trabajo, ya que las había alentado en sus propios trabajos. De manera aún más importante, mis estudiantes sintieron que al compartir mi práctica artística, me conocieron mejor y así entendieron de mejor manera mi motivación como instructora. Así, las estudiantes sintieron que esa experiencia nos acercó más como grupo.

Procedimientos y Conclusiones

Para asegurar la fiabilidad y validez de los resultados de este estudio, varios métodos de recopilación de datos fueron usados, por ejemplo: grabaciones de audio de los grupos de discusión, notas de campo y entradas de diario (hechas por mí y mis estudiantes), y se tomaron fotografías de las obras de arte producidas durante la investigación y nuestros procesos artísticos.

Las mujeres llegaron a los talleres con una noción preestablecida de sus habilidades a la hora de crear arte. Algunas se autodeclararon perfeccionistas que "no tenían talento o habilidad para hacer arte", sin embargo, asistieron al taller dejando sus reservas de lado y enfocándose en el aspecto divertido de la experiencia.

Un sentimiento de miedo permeaba a las participantes – miedo de no ser lo suficientemente buenas, miedo de cometer errores, y el miedo apremiante de que las cosas simplemente no iban a funcionar. Las estudiantes expresaron repetidamente que se sentían nerviosas al venir a los talleres, pues estaban preocupadas de sentirse poco inspiradas, de que arruinaran el trabajo ya realizado, o que no pudieran volver y corregir sus errores. A medida de que los talleres progresaron, las participantes empezaron a deprenderse de esas ideas preconcebidas acerca de sus habilidades artísticas y a celebrar sus destrezas y logros. Las estudiantes expresaron que lentamente aprendieron

a dejar ir sus inhibiciones y a divertirse con el proyecto. Aprendieron a trabajar con los errores que habían "cometido", manteniendo presente que siempre podían volver y arreglarlos, manipulando su trabajo hasta encontrar un resultado que apreciaran. En suma, a apreciar el proceso tanto como el resultado.

Las estudiantes abordaron el proceso creativo de varias maneras. Usualmente llegaban a clases con una idea de lo que esperaban crear, esperaban con ansia los talleres y después cambiaban sus expectativas mientras trabajaban. Aprendieron a curvar sus expectativas, a trabajar con los materiales dados y a superar los obstáculos que se les presentaron. Otras estudiantes fueron alentadas y sorprendidas por la diversidad de trabajos creados con un mismo hilo conductor.

Dentro de lo posible, les di a las estudiantes toda la licencia artística, el control, y el poder de toma de decisiones en los talleres. Ellas fueron las que decidieron el objeto que crearíamos en los talleres. Además, las estudiantes fueron exhortadas a participar oralmente en clase. Eventualmente, mostraron la confianza de expresar sus opiniones tanto a mí como a sus compañeras acerca de la clase, el ambiente de esta, y los trabajos creados.

En nuestra primera sesión, organicé a las estudiantes en parejas para facilitar la preparación de sus piezas artísticas. Eso estableció un tono de cooperación y camaradería dentro del grupo. Las parejas de estudiantes se acercaron en múltiples ocasiones, aun sin ser dirigidas.

Una clave esencial para el desarrollo del grupo fue el tiempo que tomamos para responder al trabajo de cada participante. Las estudiantes encontraron que ver a las demás trabajar y observar su progreso era inspirador y motivante. Siguiendo la sugerencia de las participantes, empecé a servir té a la mitad de la sesión. Las estudiantes sintieron que este gesto les daba la oportunidad para detenerse y tomar distancia para examinar su trabajo, creando además la oportunidad de observar en que habían trabajado sus compañeras.

Uno de nuestros descubrimientos clave fue el conocimiento de que las estudiantes se sentían más cómodas cuando yo tomaba un rol de autoridad en la clase, y me imponía como la profesora al poseer conocimiento profundo de los métodos que estaban siendo enseñados, al insistir en un ambiente de respeto mutuo en el aula, y posicionándome como mediadora cuando algún conflicto se presentaba. Las participantes del proyecto expresaron que a medida de que las semanas progresaron, empezaron a sentirse más apoyadas por mí y sus compañeras, lo cual permitió que llevaran sus trabajos aún más lejos de lo que pensaron posible.

El propósito de este estudio fue examinar métodos concretos para crear un espacio seguro en un ambiente artístico y educativo de carácter comunitario, con la intención de facilitar los esfuerzos del docente para que su siempre cambiante población estudiantil se pueda sentir cómoda desarrollando sus procesos de creación artística y producido obras de arte significativas. Al intentar desarrollar un espacio seguro dentro de nuestro salón de arte comunal, permitimos que nuestro grupo de estudiantes y su instructora crecieran juntas, desarrollando un ambiente que les permitiera explorar significados más profundos en su creación artística, y se sintieran cómodas experimentando con nuevas técnicas y medios.

Key words in Spanish
creación artística, espacios seguros, arte de comunitarios.

Finding Solace To Create: The Significance Of Developing Safe Space In A Community Art Classroom

The question of what constitutes safe space in a community art education context is complex and multi-faceted, drawing our attention to the importance of developing the atmosphere in the art classroom as a method to enhance students' art making practice. As a community art educator, I feel a safe space is an essential element in a classroom where artistic creation is present. In the following case study, I examine safety as a psychological construct and outline what methods educators could use to build an environment where students feel safe enough to be creative, vulnerable and genuine while having fun and learning different art techniques. When discussing safe space, I am not referring to physical safety, but a psychological, atmospheric and emotional space. I explored this notion of safe space with my students in terms of comfort and trust, amongst both the collective of students, and between the students and teacher.

This case study was developed over a five-week art course at the Lise Watier Pavilion, in Montreal, Canada, a reintegration housing facility for adult women of all ages who have recently experienced homelessness. Students were asked to reflect on their comfort levels in the classroom environment and the subsequent effect on their process. In a focus group discussion following each class, students offered suggestions on how to improve the classroom environment, which I implemented in the weeks following, with the hope of creating a space in which my students could thrive.

I chose to work with women in the already existing art program at the housing facility Lise Watier Pavilion because I wanted to investigate ways to grow our art program, not only in size but also in the quality and meaning of the works created. I identified great potential in the artistic practice of the women attending the art group, but felt that they were being held back due to lack of confidence and trust, both in themselves, and in each other as a group. By inviting the voices of all women to contribute to refining our art program, I hoped to increase their ownership of the space, and in turn their confidence and comfort.

My own experience as an artist, art teacher and art student greatly informed my desire to effectuate this research. I was a relatively timid child, not overly artistic, and always hesitant to share my creative endeavors with others. I had several unsavory experiences in art classes as a teenager, most notably with a teacher who would physically manipulate his students' art works to correct them, which eventually left me feeling disrespected and vulnerable. Thoroughly discouraged and insecure, I chose to push aside visual art learning and opted to focus my creative energies on literature and music instead. It was only after high school that I was reawakened to the visual arts through my community of friends; most of whom were actively engaged in art practices. I pushed through my fear of art with the right mix of encouragement and support from both friends and community art teachers, and eventually built a career as a ceramic artist. Later, as I began to teach art classes out of my own studio, I became exceedingly interested in finding that right mix of encouragement and support that allowed my students to create freely in my classroom and find true pleasure and release in art making. I observed that some of my students were hindered by reticence, bashful about sharing their work and intimidated by the skills of others, something that I too had experienced in art classes. I felt that I could facilitate their artistic development by establishing an environment that promoted creative thought and action.

The notion of safe space has been studied through many different facets of education, often focusing on minority or at risk groups, such as women, Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgendered, and Queers (LGBTQ), people of color, and/or people from underprivileged back grounds (Batsleer, 2008; hooks, 1989; Holley& Steiner, 2005; Toynton, 2006; Al-Amin & Nasir, 2006; Fox, 2007). Discourse most often focuses on the teacher/educator's perspective of safe space, and rarely equates the concept of safe space with its effects on

learning (Toynton, 2006; Boost Rom, 1998; Yerichuk, 2010; Hunter, 2008). Although there are some studies done in art-based environments (Hunter, 2008; Yerichuk, 2010), none address a community-based visual arts context.

In order to understand the study of safe space in a community art education setting, it is important to define and explore what is meant by safe space. Boost Rom (1998) interprets the concept of safe space as an emerging metaphor for classroom life, according to which we are all isolated; our isolation is both physical and psychic; we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality; students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed (p.389).

Hunter (2008) describes her version of safe space as a space of messy negotiations that allow individual and group actions of representation to occur, as well as opportunities for students to see how the world could be a better place. Hunter describes several facets of safe space; a space that is free from danger, one that implies metaphorical safety in which intolerance or inequality are prohibited, a comfortable or familiar physical space, and a more conceptual form of safe space that Hunter uses for her performance-based research, which maps out the creation of new work, and juxtaposes this with aesthetic risk for the creation of a space that is the product of the tension between the known and unknown. The result of her innovative look at space is a process of negotiations, which allows individuals to reflect on themselves and their presence, allowing people in a collective environment to feel empowered by negotiating the level of risk they wish to involve themselves in. Hunter (2008) insists, "cultivating safe space is therefore less about prescribing conditions and more about generating questions" (p. 19). Alternately in their research, Groen & Kawaliak (2006) inform us that "safe space, dialogue and oneness" are intertwined; each aspect influences and enlightens the other and is instrumental in the creation of an atmosphere of community (p. 63). In turn, Mayo (2010) approaches safe space in a social justice context, using humor to create a space "not devoid of dramatic shifts or emotional response, but organized around those shifts as experiences that are moments apart from conflict" (p. 509). He recognizes the "unsafe" aspects of humor and its interpretations, but insists that humor allows us to test our peers by seeing what risks they are willing to take. A quick test of the humoristic waters let us know if we can indeed forgo safety, and open up to a more in depth social and intellectual risk (p. 521).

What is clear is that depending on interpretation and politics, the concept of creating a safe space is contentious for some. Boost Rom (1998) addresses his concerns by noting that "when everyone's voice is accepted, and no one's voice can be criticized, then no one can grow," and points out that responding, criticizing and challenging helps us to change our own perspectives, and will in turn help us learn to be stronger and more brave in our own self-expression (p. 407). Barrett (2010) critiques the notion of safe space stating that it has a negative impact on student intellectual development and asserts that it is impossible to create such a space for students of oppressed or marginalized populations.

Redmond (2010) conveys that in a learning environment each student brings his or her own histories, personal experiences and understanding, which then inform classroom interactions. Her concern is that when put into a classroom that claims safe space, students with a different experience may find themselves silenced when their opinions or experiences are unpopular. Redmond asserts that the main task of the critical educator is to name the obstacles that keep us from understanding the experiences of others.

My own hope as an art educator is to push past what bell hooks (1989) describes as a "stereotypical feminist model" of space in my classroom where safety exists as a "kind and nurturing" atmosphere, by also encouraging students to

> [...] Work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion. (hooks, 1989, p. 53)

Both Barrett and Yerichuk offer additional alternatives to the concept of safe space. Barrett (2010) prefers the notion of civility because it is focused on behavior, whereas safety is concerned with the psychological state in the learning environment. Being that educators may not be able to observe or enforce interpersonal states, they do have the capacity to affect student behavior in the classroom, by modeling civility in their own behavior. Yerichuk (2010) describes safe space as a place of comfort that indicates the ease in which the learner experiences and processes content, preferring to push her students to feel some sense of discomfort, stating that "the deepest learning occurs when safety is protected but a measure of discomfort is present" (p. 21). She lays out three strategies to move closer to equitable safe space: 1) contextualizing materials (in her case songs and in my case fabric, paints, dyes and threads); 2) creating a more a self-reflective practice; and 3) shifting the focus from individual to collective learning in the classroom (p.23).

Although there are many opinions and theories about how to create safe space, and what safe space means for us as educators, there are few studies that show us how safe space affects learners (Barrett, 2010). Holley and Steiner (2005) surveyed 121 postsecondary social work students from a western university on the student perspective of 'safe and unsafe' classroom environments. The study took into account the race, gender and level of education of the participants, and gauged how this affected their results. They found that 97% of participants felt that it was both very important to create safe space in the classroom and that a safe classroom affected their learning, and although the results varied. When asked about what characteristics an educator should have to facilitate the development of safe space, 62% responded that the educator should be nonjudgmental and open, and 52% felt that educators should model participation, and develop ground rules (p.56). Due to the diversity in a community art education classroom, not only in terms of culture, age and experience, but also of skill level and knowledge, their learning is also affected by the atmospheric safety offered in the classroom. Newer or less practiced artists are often cautious in a collective or communal art making environment, for fear of feeling foolish, not getting it right, or creating works that are not aesthetically pleasing or valued (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 10)

My study builds on Andrews, Saemundsdottir and Stokrocki (2004), who found that art making enriched the lives of their female participants, which in their study were homeless, by helping them to create meaningful projects that shed light on their unique life experience. Art also allowed them to explore the notion of doing and creating something for themselves, a new concept to many of their participants. The experience of the women at the Lise Watier Pavilion differs from Andrews et al.'s (2004) study in that they have already begun this process of creating something for themselves, they were invited to create objects to make their new space at the Pavilion their own, through adorning with meaningful art works.

Background
Teaching art with women in a homeless rehabilitation program is a particular environment, and there are several key elements that set us apart from other community art

education environments. Women who have been homeless have often been victims of domestic abuse and/or violence, and many suffer from mental illness or are burdened with substance addictions (Hagen, 1987). The reintegration process can be complex, and for many, loneliness and social isolation can be a real problem (Tosi, 2005). For some of the students, the art program serves as a social event, or an opportunity to make a connection with someone outside their social circle in the Pavilion. Some of the participants in the art class stated that they were coming to the art class because of the social aspect and the action in the room, or simply to interact with me as an instructor.

Methodology & Approach

Using grounded theory and action research informed by participatory action research (PAR), I examined the concept of safe space and its effects on the art making process. The research revolves around three main questions:

- What is safe space?
- Why is safe space important?
- How can I, as a community art educator, create safe space in my classroom?

By using action research informed by PAR as a research method, the focus becomes on conducting research *with* people, and not conducting research *on* people, as well as learning and reflection between the researcher and the researched (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011, p. 51). Action research, informed by PAR, was used in an attempt to remain inclusive, contribute the sense of community in the art program, as well as ensure an environment that is conducive to the concept of safe space by striving to create conditions where the participants experienced empowerment during the study.

This type of PAR research study is considered interactive participation, with the focus on co-learning and shared decision-making by both the participants and the researcher (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 16). In this case, as has been the case with many other studies, the participants have served as a "community feedback committee," enabling the project to go forward, without adding any extra burden of data collection and analysis on the participants (Hennick et al., 2011, p. 49). The cornerstone of my method became the egalitarian treatment of participants, the focus on context and real life problems, the integration of core beliefs from the specific community I am working with and the allowance and reflection on the heterogeneous experiences within the community to enhance the research process and outcome (Kinden et al., 2007), which I think is key in community art education research given the diversity of the population addressed.

Including my students' input in the research process, allowed me to develop my perception of the classroom with a more holistic viewpoint, through the use of reflective practice and implementation of suggestions made by students on my teaching practice.

Developing the Atmosphere

Throughout the study, I made a concerted effort to change the types of motivational materials I brought in, from black and white to color photocopies, to books, video, and actual artworks. Students' opinions of the materials presented were harmonious. They all preferred books to photocopies, and found the video depicting the process of a fibers based art project, to be informative and encouraging. Leading up to our second to last art making session, I introduced the students to my own fibers based art project, a tablecloth project with accompanying video on the topic of relationships that documented my own art making process, as motivation for the next two sessions. A departure from my standard motivational materials and process of presenting the work of artists or works that demonstrate the technique being used in the workshop being taught, I chose to let the students experience my work. Even though it was not exactly what they were doing in their projects, the theme was

similar, and the base of the project was the same: a tablecloth. My intent was to increase the intimacy in the group, and create a bond between the students and myself, and demonstrate the importance of meaning making in a long-term art project.

Figure 1: Jennifer Wicks (2012) *Relationships*. Video and sound installation – screenshot

Students responded in numerous ways, expressing their appreciation and stating they felt my work informed and encouraged them to push their own work further. Most importantly the students felt that by experiencing my art practice, they knew me better, had a better understanding of where I was coming from. They felt sharing this brought us closer together as a group.

The demonstrations and explanations at the beginning of the workshops were always key to the success of the works created. I found that keeping things simple and focusing on technique and materials allowed me to transmit the concept of ease to the students. The students expressed appreciation for physical demonstrations, stating they found them to be helpful, informative and key to their success in that days' workshop.

One of the most noted points that came out of our discussions was the effect that perceived success or failure at any given task had on the outcome of the work, the self-perception of the artist, and the atmosphere in the room. I was surprised to find that students were learning to alter their "mistakes" to make them a positive. I attribute this to a collective understanding of the artmaking process as fluid and permutable developed through both teacher demonstrations, and student art practice. They were unanimous in feeling that as they experienced their perceived success, both as a group and on their own, they were encouraged to continue and this in turn inspired them to push their ideas further.

Interpretations and Findings

Figure 2: Sandra (2012) *Dragonfly*. Stencil – acrylic on fabric.

To insure the reliability and validity of the findings of this study, several means of data collection were used, including audio recorded focus groups, observational field notes and journal entries (taken both by me and my students), and photographs taken of the art works produced during the study and our process. To initiate the study, current students and interested residents were invited to join the studio art class through the means of a flyer posted in the entranceway. They chose to create fibers-based works, specifically tablecloths, with the intention of personalizing their individual apartments.

The residents expressed several reasons for taking part in the art program, and the study, most notably for distraction, to have fun, and as a personal challenge. It was clear right from the start that those that committed to participate were serious about it. The women arrived in the workshops with a preexisting notion of their art making abilities. Some were self-proclaimed perfectionists with "no talent, or art making skills," yet they came regardless of their apprehension, and chose to put the focus on fun.

Fear also permeated the participants – fear of not being good enough, fear of making mistakes, fear of failure, and the overwhelming fear that things just were not going to work out. On several occasions students expressed that they were worried about the more technical aspects of art making, and demonstrated apprehension when faced with the notion

of undertaking a large-scale project. Students repeatedly expressed that they felt nervous before coming to the workshops, worried that they would be uninspired, that they would ruin the work they had already done, or be unable to come back and fix mistakes.

As the workshops progressed I found the participants started to shed some of their preconceived notions about their art making abilities and celebrate their skills, and accomplishments. Students expressed that they were learning to let go of their inhibitions, and have fun with the project. They had learned to work with any 'mistakes' they had made, keeping in mind that they could always come back and fix things, and manipulate the work until they found a result they appreciated. They were learning to appreciate the process as much as the product.

The students approached the creative process in a number of ways. They often arrived with an idea of what they hoped to create, expressing anticipation for the coming workshop, and then it would change as they worked. They learned to bend their expectations, and work with what they had, or manipulate their work to overcome obstacles they had encountered. Others were encouraged and surprised by the diversity of works created with the same materials under the same theme.

One aspect of comfort that came up in a rather heated discussion during our first focus group was the notion of visitors (other residents not in the art class) wandering in and out of the workshop, observing, speaking with participants, and occasionally commenting on the work. Although some participants were comfortable with visitors coming into the space, others found their presence disturbing, and became visibly upset. In response to this sensitivity and to ensure a safe space, in subsequent sessions I kept the door to the room slightly closed, to create a more intimate atmosphere, and discouraged visitors from coming in. This was an effective method of quelling the number of visitors we had in the space. In future workshops the participants who had so vehemently opposed having non-participants in the room, felt that the odd visitor was fine, suggesting that as their confidence increased their vulnerability and subsequent anxiety was diminished.

In the spirit of PAR and in the hopes of creating a sense of community, and autonomy in the classroom, I gave the students as much artistic license, decision-making power, and control over the workshops as possible. They determined the object that we would be making during the workshops. Students were encouraged to speak up during the workshops, and eventually showed confidence in expressing their opinions to me, and each other, concerning the class, the atmosphere and the works created, giving me the sense that they were truly becoming comfortable in the space.

The creation of safe space was at the forefront of my teaching practice from the outset. In our first session, I had the students pair up to facilitate the preparation of their pieces. This set a tone for mutual aid, and camaraderie in the group. The student pairs often came back together, without being directed to do so, to assist and support each other. Several of the students noted their appreciation of the other students' presence, support, encouragement and even constructive critiques of their work. Students were encouraged to share all the materials I brought to the group. They organized themselves so that when one was done with a material that someone else needed they would pass it along.

Figure 3: Christine (2012) *Fleur de lis*. Painting – acrylic & dye on fabric.

Key to the development of the group was the informal time we took to respond and celebrate the work of each participant, offering suggestions and our praise for the uniqueness of each creation. Students found that watching others work, and observing their progress was inspiring and motivating. Following the suggestion of the participants, I began serving tea mid-session, in an effort to create a stronger bond and community in the classroom. Students felt that this gesture created an opportunity to take a step back, and explore their work from a far, as well as take a moment to view what the other participants had been working on.

One of our key findings in this study was the notion that students felt more comfortable when I took a role of authority in the classroom, and asserted myself as the teacher by having an in depth knowledge of the methods being taught as well as insisting on mutual respect in the classroom, and putting myself forward as a mediator in times of conflict. bell hooks (2010) substantiates this concept in her work on teaching critical thinking by proclaiming that if we can "think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict (p.87)."

Educational Significance

In the context of community art education, creating a 'safe space', or a space where students feel confident letting their guard down, enhances their ability to think and express themselves more freely, in turn opening them up to hear and contemplate new ideas, and new ways of seeing (Aprill & Townsell, 2007). Finding the space in where we can build trust, most notably with more vulnerable populations, and establish a sense of true

community will foster the development of artistic skills and allow an artistic sense of identity to emerge amongst participants (Clover, 2007). The participants in this project expressed that as the weeks progressed, they began to feel supported by me, and by their fellow students, and that this allowed them to push their work further than they had thought possible.
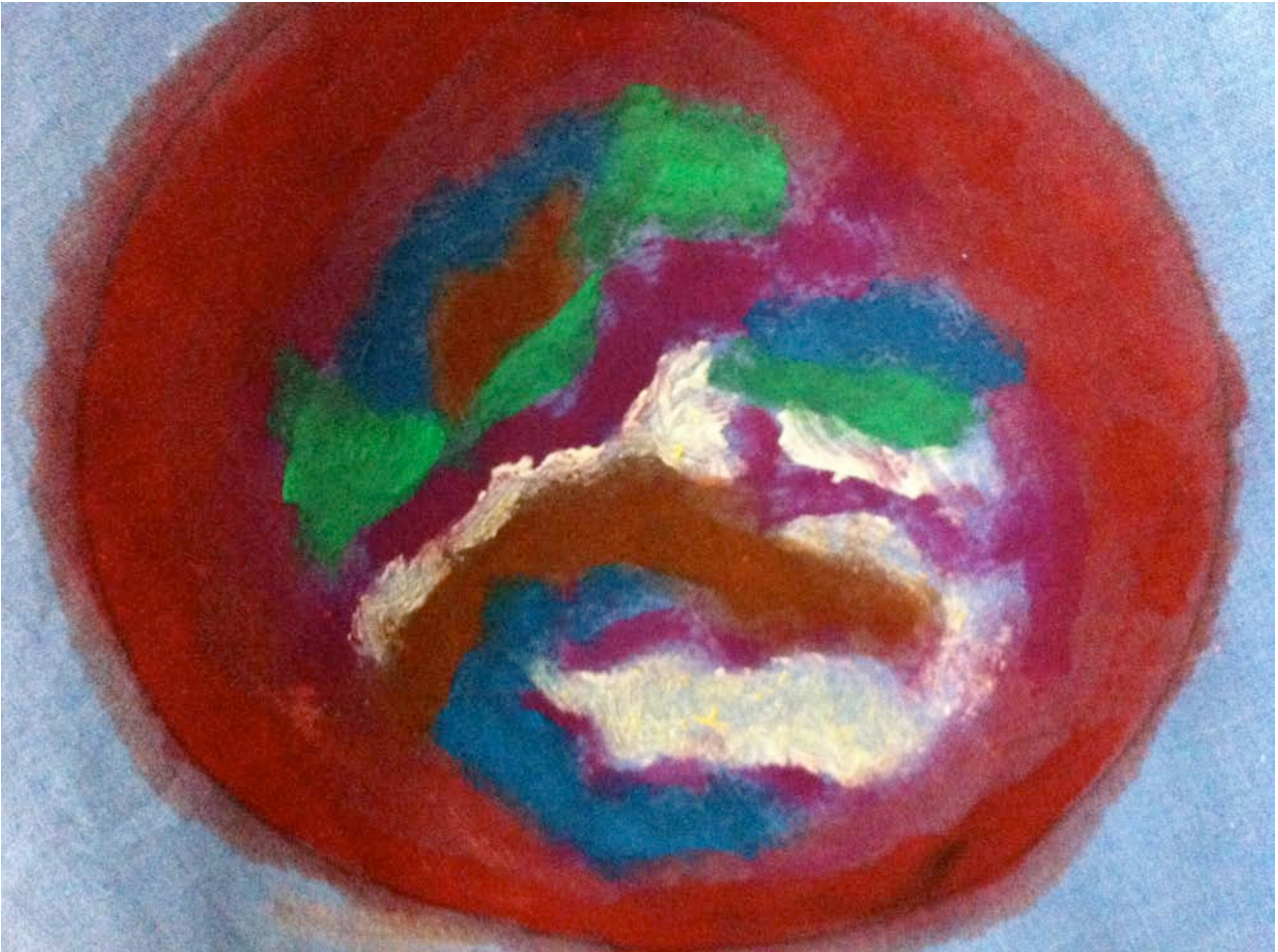

Figure 4: Carol (2012) *Planete*. Painting – acrylic & dye on fabric.

The development of safe space and a trusting environment in the community art education classroom depends on a concerted effort put forth by the educator to ensure that all participants feel comfortable, protected and valued. Springgay (2010) suggests that to build community in our classrooms, we must favor classrooms that foster listening and critical dialogue. I feel for this to be the case we must first begin by developing the practice of a caring teacher (hooks, 2003; Noddings 2003). With the participants in the Lise Watier Pavilion art program, I was able to explore how to begin to develop such a practice, and in turn, such a space.

In terms of participation, students were encouraged to be autonomous, and to get involved in the class' activities. Asking students to work in pairs aided in the forming of bonds between certain participants, which remained a constant throughout the study (it should be noted that students chose their own partners). I received participant suggestions for changes to the course plans, the space or the atmosphere with enthusiasm. Regarding motivational materials, the introduction of my art practice proved to bring the group closer together and encourage an environment of mutual sharing and trust. In general, students preferred motivational materials in the form of books, video or tangible art works.

Photocopies were not as well received. Students felt the demonstrations should be simple and explained well. I found that in terms of the timing of the class, as long as the participants were inspired and engulfed in their work, the class could last anywhere between two and three hours comfortably.

The purpose of this study was to examine concrete methods to create safe space in a community art education environment, with the intention of facilitating the community art educator's efforts in creating an environment in which their ever- changing student base can feel comfortable developing their art making process and producing significant works of art. By attempting to develop a safe space within our community art making classroom we enabled our group of students and educator to grow together, and develop an environment which enabled them to explore deeper meaning in their art making, and become comfortable experimenting with new art techniques and mediums. This study will be beneficial to new as well as seasoned community art educators in the conscious development of safe space in the art class room, enabling them to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages their students to create without fear of reprisal, as well as develop an authentic sense of community in their classrooms, empowering students to take part in both the art learning, making and sharing processes.

References

Al-Amin, J. & Nasir, N.S. (2006). Creating identity-safe spaces on college campuses for Muslim students. *Change, 38*(2), 22-27.

Andrews, S. S., Saemundsdottir, S., & Stokrocki, M. (2004). The role of art for homeless women and survivors of domestic violence. *Visual Arts Research, 30*(1), 73-82.

Aprill, A. & Townsell, R. (2007). The arts as an occasion for collective adult learning as authentic community development. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 116*, p.51-63.

Barrett, B.J. (2010). Is "safety" dangerous? A critical examination of the classroom as safe space. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 1(*1). Retrieved from: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea/vol1/iss1/9

Batsleer, J.R. (2008). Informal learning in youth work. SAGE Publications. Retrieved 15 November 2011, from http://0-lib.myilibrary.com.mercury.concordia.ca?ID=233719

Boost Rom, R (1998). 'Safe spaces': Reflections on an educational metaphor. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 30*(4), 397-408.

Bayles, D. & Orland, T. (1993). Art & fear: Observations on the perils (and rewards) of artmaking. United States of America: Image Continuum Press.

Clover, D. (2007). Feminist aesthetic practice of community development: The case of myths and mirrors community arts. *Community Development Journal, 42(*4), 512-522.

Fox, C. (2007). From transaction to transformation: (En)countering white heteronormativity in "safe spaces." *College English, 69*(5), 496-511.

Groen, J & Kawalilak, C. (2006). Creating community: A 'new' faculty perspective. *Organization Development Journal, 24*(1), 57-67.

Hagen, J.L. (1987). Gender and homelessness. *Social work, 32*(4), 312-316.

Hennick, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2011). Qualitative research methods. Los Angeles: Sage.

Holley, L. & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education, 41*(1), 49 -64.

hooks, b. (2010). Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom. New York, NY: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2003). Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope. Great Britain: Routledge.

hooks, b. (1989). Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black. Toronto, On: Between the Lines.

Hunter, M.A. (2008). Cultivating the art of safe space, Research in drama education. *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 13*(1), 5-21.

Kindon, S., Pain, R. & Kesby, M. (2007). Participatory action research approaches and methods: Connecting people, participation and place. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved 19 November 2011, from http://0-lib.myilibrary.com.mercury.concordia.ca?ID=110231

Mayo, C. (2010). Incongruity and provisional safety: Thinking through humor. *Studies in philosophy and education, 29*(6), 509 – 52.

McRae, D. (2006). Make it real: Participatory action research with adult learners. Vancouver, BC: Research in Practice in Adult Literacy.

Noddings, N. (2003). Happiness and Education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Redmond, M. (2010). Safe space oddity: Revisiting critical pedagogy. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 30*(1), 1-14.

Springgay, S. (2010). Knitting as an aesthetic of civic engagement: Re-conceptualizing feminist pedagogy through touch. *Feminist Teacher, 20*(2), 111-123.

Tosi, A. (2005). Re-Housing and social reintegration of homeless people: A case study from Milan. *Innovation, 18*(2), 183-190.

Toynton, R. (2006). 'Invisible other': Understanding safe spaces for queer learners and teachers in adult education. *Studies in the Education of Adults. 38(*2), 178-194.

Yerichuk, D. (2010). Learning as a troubling prospect: Considerations of safety and risk in community singing. *Canadian Music Educator, 52*(2), 20-24.