In her autobiography, Sally Mann states “The Platonic doctrine of recollection asserts that we do not learn but rather, with time and penetrating inquiry, release the comprehensive knowledge that came bundled with us at birth. In this concept, we each hold within ourselves “the other” by virtue of our shared humanity, with artists (in theory) being uniquely qualified to transcend their own identity and gain access to the unknown other through empathy and imagination” (284). We have seen that artists working with cross-sector populations appear to be uniquely able to relate and interact with diverse populations. Their position as social outliers helps them to relate to populations in a manner that is neither condescending or patronizing. Successful programs instituted “by one person, an artist, who saw a need and responded artistically” (Cleveland 130) provide participants with meaningful creative challenges that honor their unique abilities and experiences. Strong programs have a clear artistic focus, meet the participants where they are, and spend time with the population to insure that they are meeting the needs of the participants. As seen in the Penelope Project, engaging all stakeholders insures success and impact past the completion of the original project. Another critical component is the empowerment of the population through public exhibition of their work, be it a performance, publication or exhibit. This allows them to shed labels and see themselves, and be seen by a wider audience, as artists.

The strategies that insure a successful cross-sector program can translate directly to the high school art program. Treating students as artists, taking the time to get to know them, having a clear artistic focus, and executing a rigorous program are all effective practices that I employ regularly. Creating a safe community that supports creativity encourages students to take risks and stretch themselves artistically. In a diverse population, fostering a sense of community and shared vision in the art room can forge connections between students who may not otherwise interact. These relationships can break down many social and cultural barriers.

As a visual artist I often work alone. I have created a strong community within the art room but have been guilty of isolating myself and my students from the broader community. One of the most important revelations that I have gained from this course is the power of opening one’s practice to a wider audience and participating more fully in community culture. I keep coming back to the anecdote in the Penelope Project of the painter and the faulty assumption that the aesthetic needs of the project were beyond their understanding. There are so many untapped resources in the community that could add breadth and depth to a program and help to support students. In addition, students can be a resource for the community. I often get so focused on what is going on within the walls of the school that I don’t think about the community outside of the school. Seeing some of my classmates’ research inspires me to seek out opportunities for my students to become mentors and community arts activists. For example, there is an elder care center across the street from our school. I never thought of this as a possible place for students to engage until our Skype interview with Anne Bastings. She asked “Who are your neighbors? What is on your block?” So obvious! Allowing students to share their knowledge and passion is a win for both the students and the participants. Students can be the authority and feel empowered. Participants, regardless of the population, benefit from engaging in creative activities that enrich their lives. This has the added benefit of growing the arts community as people see the effect that practicing art can have on people.

It is important in the current social climate for people to see the benefit of creative practice for all people. Anne Bastings referred to it as “witnessing the miracle of engagement” in our Skype interview. Ashley Minner offered that “everything is community art whether you acknowledge it or not,” implying that there is always input, always interaction that informs the work. I feel that my job is to give students the technical skills and confidence to realize their creative vision and inspire them to take on the responsibility of using this to benefit the community.

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