

Learning to Teach the Creative Arts in Primary Schools Through Community Engagement

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Community engagement has been used for many years to enhance and strengthen teacher education courses, preparing student teachers with real life learning experiences as they work with community groups in mutually beneficial projects. This research examines a community engagement project that involved 13 undergraduate creative arts students who were planning to enroll in a post-graduate teacher education degree course when they had completed their initial degree. The students were placed in a primary school to work on a variety of creative arts-based projects with a range of teachers and classes with the aim of learning skills, knowledge, and strategies about teaching in relation to the creative arts. Outcomes from the project included an increasing confidence and competence in relation to teaching skills, knowledge, and strategies by the students as they were involved in the action – reflection cycle of community engagement. The school community also benefited from the project as children were developing creative arts skills and knowledge as they worked with the university students, and the teachers gained new ideas in relation to implementing the creative arts in their classrooms.

Community engagement seeks to link university students with community agencies to provide mutually beneficial experiences, knowledge and outcomes, guided by reflection (McCarthy, 2003). As the university students are involved in community engagement service projects within the agency, they are encouraged by their lecturers to reflect on their own learning as part of their university course. McCarthy (2003) defined academic service learning, or community engagement, as “linking academic instruction with community service, guided by reflection” (p. 1) and it is this ongoing reflection that sets service learning outside the parameters of work experience or volunteering in the community.

McCarthy’s model (2003) is based on the thesis that students gain both positive and negative experiences through their involvement with community agencies, each other, their lecturer and the larger community. They bring their knowledge from past experiences to their community engagements, and also gain knowledge from their participation in, and the processes of, the service learning experiences. As they reflect on these, they actively engage with their thoughts, feelings and actions and through this, put their experiences into context, making connections with their knowledge and their experiences. This case study seeks to suggest a fourth aspect of community engagement, that of change. As students reflect on their experiences and knowledge, this often gives them the impetus to bring about change in both their personal and professional lives, as well as within the community agency in which they are working.

Community Engagement

Community engagement has been used for many years to enhance and strengthen teacher education courses, to provide authentic learning experiences for the students and to enhance community life (Swick, 2001). It can also link university students with their local community, combining service and learning to meet the mutually defined needs of each of the parties involved (Schaffer, Mather, & Gustafson, 2000). It allows students to participate in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes in order to achieve definable goals as they develop skills and knowledge not necessarily developed in the normal university lecture or tutorial setting (Dudderar & Stover, 2003).

As they engage in community engagement, students develop skills in personal reflection, as well as self-confidence, sense of civic responsibility and interpersonal skills. Community engagement can be successfully integrated into course content in a variety of curriculum areas and so enhance students’ understanding, practice and skills in these subjects (Wells & Grabert, 2004). Involvement in community service projects can also be used to help students planning to be teachers increase their own language and communication skills as they interact with children from diverse cultures and develop understanding of the different backgrounds from which these children come (Meaney, Bohler, Scott, & Hernandez, 2005). McCarthy (2003) summed up the pedagogical approach of community service by stating that the basic, interdependent components of service learning are

experience, reflection, and knowledge. This case study used these three aspects as foundational tools to consolidate and enhance the students' learning.

Throughout their community engagement project, the students focused on teaching the creative arts in the primary school. Learning the arts for arts sake is vitally important (Mahlmann, n.d.; Mills, 1998). Children need to experience and understand the complexity and beauty of the world of music, drama, dance, and visual arts for themselves. Being involved in the arts gives children the tools for lifelong learning within the arts so they have the opportunity for pleasure and for self-development, creativity, and self-expression, opening up a range of new experiences and opportunities they may have never realized existed (Combs, 1991; Russell-Bowie, 2006). However, quality arts programs also have far-reaching tangential effects that influence every aspect of children's lives, both inside and outside of school, and give them a deeper understanding of themselves and others (Oddliefson, 1994; Ultan, 1989). The arts enhance children's academic achievement (Combs, 1991; Fiske, 1999; Jensen, 2001), help them develop respect for themselves and others (Mahlmann, n.d.), give them training for life (Perrin, 1994), and provide them with valid ways for self-expression (Mills, 1998; Russell-Bowie, 2006). These were some of the reasons for ensuring the students were involved in the creative arts within this project.

Aims of the "MMADD about the Arts" Project

This case study examined an innovative and challenging community service project that involved 13 undergraduate students who were planning to enroll in a post-graduate teacher education degree course when they had completed their initial degree. The students had no teacher training but were keen to be involved in a school situation. They were placed in a primary school to work on a variety of creative arts-based projects with a range of teachers and classes, with no payment being made to the teachers, as the program was planned to be mutually beneficial. The primary school was selected because the lecturer had built up positive relationships with the staff and was thus able to get permission for the whole school to be involved in this project. The creative arts community service project within the school was called MMADD about the Arts, with the acrostic MMADD indicating the five art forms in which they would be involved: Music, Media, Arts, Dance, and Drama.

Community engagement in this context was used to give the future teacher-education students experiences to socialize them into the culture of the primary school and also give them the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of working in a primary school (Swick, 2001). The projects also aimed at helping them gain

knowledge about teaching strategies, pedagogy, behavior management and subject content within the creative arts (Dudderar & Stover, 2003) and throughout the unit, students were asked to reflect on various facets of being a teacher, through observation, research, practical experiences, and talking with the teachers and children (McCarthy, 2003).

Context and Participants

The school. The school involved in this community service project (named Greentree Public School for this paper) is located in a low socio-economic area with 87% of children coming from a non-English speaking (mainly Arabic) background. Many of the teachers lacked confidence in implementing a creative arts program due to the lack of resources, time, training, priority, and support in this key learning area. These subjects (music, media, art, dance, and drama), although very important within the holistic development of children, are often given minimal time and priority in teacher education courses and primary schools, and as a consequence are often ineffectively taught or not taught at all on a regular basis in the classroom (Jeanneret, 1997; Lopherd, n.d.; Mills, 1989).

The students. The 13 students who undertook the creative arts community service project were all enrolled in undergraduate degrees and were planning to enroll in the Bachelor of Teaching postgraduate course when they had completed their first degree. This was their only path to becoming primary school teachers, as the university no longer offered an undergraduate teacher education program. Most of the students had experience, expertise, and interest in one or more of the art forms and all were eager to receive hands-on experience within the primary school setting.

The university subject. As part of their undergraduate degree, students could enroll in a 20 credit point unit called Learning through Community Service, which was equivalent in length and rigor to two university units and was spread over a 5-month period. The unit was organized by cohorts, or strands, that represented disciplines across the College of Arts; these included International Buddies, mentoring of university students requiring assistance in literacy skills, ESL mentoring of recent immigrants in local communities, video-making and the creative arts education project, and MMADD about the Arts. Thirteen students completed this creative arts project within the Learning Through Community Service unit and were based at Greentree Public School.

Methodology

As part of a case study approach, the students completed surveys, reflections, and assignments, in

order to ascertain what learning was occurring within the MMADD about the Arts project, and the students took the role of participant-observers. In the introductory on-campus session, they completed a qualitative survey in which they indicated their experiences in teaching and in the arts and their anticipated outcomes from the unit.

During the 14 weeks of semester, the students completed at least 80 hours in the school setting, and were involved in one or more creative arts projects, which included team teaching creative arts lessons with the teacher, organizing a children's art exhibition in the community, running creative arts workshops in an After School Arts Program, and participating in a Creative Arts Fun day across the whole school. Every 3 weeks, they wrote a reflection to document their learning in relation to the context of their projects; the learning experiences in which they were involved; the classroom management strategies they were observing and practicing; and their evaluation of the learning within the project for themselves, the children, the staff, and the local community. A final assignment summarized and analyzed these reflections and allowed them to develop a synthesis of their learning throughout the unit as they articulated their own philosophy of teaching. Throughout the semester, the students were also involved in observation, consultation, peer assessment, and interviewing teachers about the outcomes of the different projects in relation to themselves, the children, the staff, and the school community.

In the final on-campus session, the students completed a qualitative survey indicating what they had learned from being involved in the different MMADD about the Arts projects.

MMADD about the Arts: Experiences

McCarthy (2003) states that the basic, interdependent components of service learning are experience, knowledge, and reflection. In relation to experiences, within the MMADD About the Arts strand of the Learning Through Community Service unit, the students initially met with their lecturer for 3 days of intensive on-campus sessions that included lectures on the concept of community service and experiential workshops relating to creative arts education. The principal of the school came to speak to the students and answer any questions, and DVDs and photos were shown of the children from the school involved in creative arts activities to give them the context of their projects. A questionnaire completed by the students indicated their experience and interest in the arts and a survey completed by the teachers from the school indicated in what areas they would like the students to work throughout the school. From this information, three main projects were developed and implemented

by the university students, within the school community; these included the following:

1. *Artistes in Residence: Training in Schools (ARTS)*. Within this project, the university students worked 1 day a week or 2 half days in a local school, in one or more of their selected art forms and in one or more classes throughout the school. The university students and teachers worked together to plan how their skills and knowledge would be used effectively throughout the day.

The university students could work with one class throughout the day, or across one stage, or in a variety of classes. Some of the ways the students, teachers, and children worked together in the creative arts each day included

- Thematic team teaching with the class teacher, using a theme integrating music, art, media, dance and/or drama to enhance literacy skills;
- Kinderarts: using the five art forms to support what was being taught within the Kindergarten curriculum to deepen learning and engage the children more effectively;
- Team teaching lessons with the class teacher on the selected art form(s) to a class.
- Working towards a Creative Arts Fun Day or Harmony Day where all children in the school were involved in creative arts activities throughout the day, organized and implemented by the university students.
- Big books for Little Kids: working with a small group of children to write a children's story, publish it in a large format, illustrate it, practise a Reader's Theatre for it and add appropriate instruments to represent the characters and events in the story. The children would then put this all together and present it to the Kindergarten classes, as well as local pre-schools in the area.

2. *After School Arts Program (ASAP)*. The university students were involved in running creative arts workshops after school in their selected art form(s) with teachers and Year 5 and 6 children from the school. This program was offered for one and a half hours each week on Thursday afternoons; the university students were expected to attend and work with the children and teachers for at least 12 sessions. They were to be responsible for team (or individual) teaching a group of 6 - 8 children from years 5 and 6 in one of the art forms; as well as teaching, the students organized resources for each session, set these up and cleared them away, and reflected on each session and the overall program. Each set of learning experiences were planned to continue over 3 weeks with one group of children, repeated for the next group of children over

the following 3 weeks, then repeated a third time with a new group of children.

3. *Kids Art in the Community (KAIC)*. The university students worked with teachers and children from local schools to develop, curate, and coordinate an art exhibition in the local community. Children from local schools would be invited to be involved in art workshops on a community-relevant theme, as they prepared for this exhibition. The resulting artworks were hung in selected shops and community buildings in the local suburb for several weeks after the launch. As part of this project, university students were involved in

- contacting each school with information about the workshops and exhibition;
- running art workshops on the given theme in each participating school and/or class;
- approaching the local shopping centre and asking them to exhibit children's artworks;
- collecting, framing, and curating the artworks to create the exhibition;
- publicizing the workshops and exhibition;
- reflecting on the effectiveness of the workshops and exhibition.

MMADD about the Arts: Knowledge

The second component of community service is knowledge (McCarthy, 2003). As part of the introductory on-campus sessions, the students learned through lectures and workshops the underlying concepts of service learning as well as the basic elements of each of the creative art forms. They also learned about integrating the arts through being involved in the implementation of practical thematic creative arts units during the workshops and interacting with the principal and lecturer around a variety of discussion topics.

Another source of knowledge for the students was their set text, which provided them with a theoretical foundation for teaching the creative arts, as well as many practical ideas for teaching each of the art forms and integrating the arts within the classroom. As well, students were encouraged to research the content for any lessons in which they were involved while at the school and through this, many learned new skills and consolidated previous learning within the arts.

The students also discussed their own classroom interaction with their teachers to gain pointers for improvement and suggestions for future lessons. These discussions formed for the students a solid foundation of knowledge about pedagogy and teaching philosophies that they gradually put into practice and internalized.

As well as gaining knowledge through their involvement in the program, students also brought their own knowledge about the creative arts to the school. Some students had specific and developed skills in one or more art forms, while others had a more general knowledge of the arts. Some students brought to the program their own life experiences of working with children in different out-of-school settings, while others brought their knowledge gained from their experiences as parents. All of this knowledge was recognized, valued, and used as they worked and reflected throughout the project.

MMADD about the Arts: Reflection

Reflection is the third component of community service (McCarthy, 2003), and, therefore, the students were required to reflect in various aspects of their learning experiences within the school community throughout their time there. These reflections were each focused on a different aspect of learning to teach, as follows:

Reflection 1: Situational analysis. In this assignment students reflected on and described the contextual description of the school and gave an overview of the projects in which they were to be involved.

Reflection 2: Planned learning experiences. In this assignment, students were required to reflect on themselves as learners and teachers, their observations of the staff and children with whom they worked, the teaching and learning environments they observed, and the content, resources and outcomes related to the learning experiences they prepared and taught.

Reflection 3: Reflections on management strategies. Students were asked to reflect on the management strategies used by their teachers and by themselves, in relation to the acronym of CREATIVE classroom management model (Russell-Bowie, 2006) and current research (i.e., reflections were focused on Children; Rewards, rules and routines; Environment; Attitudes; Time and resource management; Interactive activities; Variety; and Enthusiasm).

Reflection 4: Reflections on learning within the project. Students were also asked to reflect on and evaluate the value of the experiences in which they have participated, using a variety of assessment and evaluation measures (e.g., observations, consultation, using outcomes and indicators, self-assessment and peer-assessment).

Final Portfolio. As a culminating synthesis of their learning experiences, and based on their previous four reflections, students were required to reflect on why they wanted to be a teacher, what they considered to be a good teacher, and what was their understanding of the process of learning.

Results

Throughout this Learning Through Community Service project, service learning was used to enhance and provide a strong foundation for the students' future involvement in teacher education courses, as well as providing authentic learning experiences for the students and enhancing the community life of the school (Swick, 2001). It allowed students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes in order to achieve definable goals as they developed skills and knowledge not necessarily developed in the normal teacher education lecture/tutorial setting (Dudderar & Stover, 2003). The unit emphasized the three important foundations of service learning, that of experience, reflection, and knowledge (McCarthy, 2003) and these were key themes arising from the students' analysis of the outcomes of the unit. All involved with the project felt that it was a mutually valuable and significant learning experience for children, student teachers, and classroom teachers alike.

The students gained practical knowledge and reflected regularly on their experiences. One student commented,

This subject had given an opportunity to the university students to gain hands on experience and get a better understanding of what teaching would be like. It also gave us the opportunity to participate in a wonderful program that allows us to use our experience and knowledge to give back to a school that would normally go without, all with attaining academic recognition. ... It confirms that I made the right decision to study to become a teacher and I know that I have learnt many valuable tools and resources that will give me a head start when I do my teacher education course and it has also given me confidence in myself.

Changes in Students

Service learning can be used to enhance and strengthen teacher education courses and to provide authentic learning experiences for the students (Swick, 2001). As part of their reflections, students reflected on the changes in their personal and professional life as a result of participating in this unit. Part of this involved reflecting on their development and learning throughout the unit, which included a recognition that they had learned much about teaching, their confidence and competence had increased significantly, they had confirmation that they wanted to be teachers and they learned about the importance of teaching the creative arts.

Changes in confidence and competence. Each of the students noted throughout the semester that they had developed significantly in relation to their confidence and competence in the classroom:

I have noticed immense changes in my confidence and competence within my teaching experience at the school. I was initially nervous and anxious but now I just feel motivated, excited and very comfortable teaching. (DH)

Changes in understandings and practices in relation to teaching. The students indicated that having the practical, hands on experience of working in a classroom alongside an experienced teacher helped them learn key teaching skills and strategies and attitudes. One student commented:

Hands-on teaching, being thrown into the 'deep end' and having no previous teaching experience or learning education has made me realize that with a bit of help and study we can achieve anything that we set our minds to. At first we were overwhelmed, but now we are able to say that we can plan a lesson, consult with a teacher and experience a wonderful school! (EC)

Changing and confirming their chosen career. Several students indicated that they had decided to become teachers, although they had initially been hesitant about this career choice, and one student changed from planning to be a psychologist to becoming a primary school teacher. This confirmation about their chosen career was summed up by one student:

I remember my first day in the Kindergarten classroom where we were just helping the teacher. I thought the children were all so lovely but I never remotely thought I would want to teach Kindergarten. As the weeks progressed, I couldn't believe my change in thinking towards these children. I really loved teaching children and they responded very well to me. This came about as an increase in confidence, positive reinforcement from my teacher as well as chatting with her about what she thought of my lesson plans, and perhaps most importantly, bouncing ideas and getting suggestions from other students. (DD)

Changes in practices in relation to teaching the creative arts. All the students indicated throughout the semester that they had learned a significant amount of teaching strategies, especially in relation to teaching the creative arts.

I feel I have learned so much in the last 10 weeks and I feel comfortable that I would be able to integrate a quality arts program into my own teaching pedagogy. This practical experience has really made me realize just how important the arts are and what children get out of a good arts program. Initially I thought the arts was (sic) just painting etc, now I realize there is so much more to that, the arts build on children's life skills and give them tools to negotiate the adult world. Children are given a safe space to practice these new skills and become well educated, accepting adults. It will be an experience I will never forget. (AS)

Job opportunities. As a direct result of their involvement in this unit, one student took up a position at the school as a creative arts teacher for pre-school children, one day a week, another was accepted as a creative arts teacher one day a week at a special school and a third student is looking for a part time work as a teacher's aide during her undergraduate course.

Change in Classroom Practice for the Teachers

Community service projects allow students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes (Dudderar & Stover, 2003). Teachers were also asked about the benefits they received by having the university students actively engaging with them in their classes; these included that they had new ideas and inspiration about teaching the creative arts, and that they appreciated having other adults in the classroom so they could work individually with children.

Inspired to teach more creative arts. Some teachers had initially been hesitant to include the arts in their weekly programs but, after their involvement with the children in their classrooms, they started to think that they could include similar creative arts activities for their children. Students noted this change in attitude as follows:

Some of the staff have said they would feel more comfortable teaching a creative arts lesson now after seeing my lessons and experiencing the arts in a simple, yet effective way. (JC)

Extra pairs of hands. The staff appreciated having another adult in the classroom to assist them with teaching the arts, as noted by some students:

Mrs. C informed us that she only does painting when we are in the classroom to help. She enjoys having us in her classroom as it is a new experience for her class, and she is able to work on

other projects, such as individually testing each student on their numbers and letters. (AD)

Changes in Children's Experiences and Development

The arts enhance children's academic achievement, develop respect for themselves and others, give them training for life, and provide them with valid ways for self-expression (Russell-Bowie, 2006). Through observation and consultation, the students and teachers noted that many children had developed academically, emotionally, socially, and artistically as a result of being involved in the creative arts learning experiences provided by the program. Students' comments about the development of children's learning and outcomes as a result of being involved in the creative arts, were categorized under the four headings of academic achievement, respect for self and others, training for life, and self-expression.

Academic achievement. Students indicated that their teachers had said the children had been involved in experiences they had not had before and that individual children had changed significantly for the better academically as a result of the University students teaching the arts lessons. For example, one student noted,

Their teacher told me that through involvement through the arts, the ESL children have improved in every aspect of learning new vocabulary and speech. (CF)

Respect for self and others. Students also reported that many children had developed social skills and respect for others as a result of participating in the arts lessons:

Through the arts I was able to reinforce concepts the children were learning, and also help to teach them respect for each other, such as listening to each other, turn taking and sharing. (ER)

Training for life. The students reported that the children with whom they worked had developed and improved in generic skills such as listening skills, team work, problem solving, patience, and willingness to learn:

Through the dance lessons, the children were developing team work, positive reinforcement and turn taking skills, all of which are important in the adult world. (PL)

Self-expression. As a result of participating in the arts lessons, the students indicated that the children

were able to develop and use their self-expression more than previously:

Through music, art, drama and dance, I was able to stimulate children's imagination and creativity and as a result the children learned how to keep focus and how to communicate with themselves and others through different mediums. (SO)

Outcomes for the School Community

Community engagement can link university students with their local community, combining service and learning to meet the mutually defined needs of each of the parties involved (Schaffer, Mather, & Gustafson, 2000). The children, parents, and staff also commented on the benefits received by the school community from the university students being involved in the creative arts community service project. After talking to some parents of the children they had been teaching throughout the semester, the students commented,

I found that the parents thought that teaching creative arts in school was a good idea because it keeps the children active and doing things that are enjoyable, while at the same time getting the basic learning skills necessary for the rest of their lives. (BT)

The parents commented to me about how much their children had enjoyed the drumming classes and they enjoyed seeing their children involved in such a fun and productive class. (DD)

I was under the impression that parents wouldn't be too keen on their children doing something a bit different to their set school curriculum. However, after Harmony Day, and all the different creative arts activities all of us university students assisted in, the response from the parents was amazing, they were so pleased that their children were involved in so many different activities associated with so many different cultures. (SH)

Challenges and Changes

Although there were very few negative comments about the community engagement projects, from the students, teachers or children, there were some challenges noted by the lecturer involved. Firstly, there had been one instance of a personality clash between a small group of students and a teacher. Secondly, timetabling commitments meant it was impossible for the lecturer to meet with all students together except in the initial on-campus workshops. Thirdly, it was a challenge for some students to see their commitment to

the school, teachers, and children as MORE than just completing a university subject, and, finally, there were almost too many students for the one small school.

In response to these challenges, the next time the unit was offered the following actions were implemented:

- Instigation of a weekly online e-journal which was not assessed, and in which students described what they had done that week, what they had learned and what action they would make as a result of this. This allowed the lecturer to keep in touch with each of the students and to find out about difficulties before they became too large to handle effectively. The completion of the e-journal also meant that face-to-face meetings between the lecturer and the students were not so crucial.
- A code of behavior and expectations for students was developed and disseminated to all students.
- Students were allowed to organize their own school placement for 4 hours a week and work the other 4 hours a week in the common school.

These actions, implemented in the next semester, have significantly decreased the challenges noted in the first semester.

Conclusion

Involvement in the community engagement creative arts projects within a local primary school setting provided the prospective teacher education students with a valuable opportunity to use their own knowledge within the classroom; to gain new knowledge from their teachers, peers, action, reflection, and research; and to experience first hand the challenges and rewards of teaching the creative arts to children. Through the cycle of action and reflection they learned much more than if they had just participated in tutorials without the focused teaching experience. Although a theoretical and practical framework for teaching the arts in the primary school had been covered in the on-campus workshops, in the set text, and within their own research, it was not until they actually had the opportunity to teach lessons that they *discovered* appropriate knowledge, skills, and strategies and incorporated them into their teaching.

The *MMADD about the Arts* project allowed students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes in order to achieve definable goals (Dudderar & Stover, 2003). As the project came to an

end, the students realized how much they had changed, both personally and professionally, in that they had increased their confidence and competence as neophyte teachers, they had learned much about teaching and creative arts education and they were confirmed in their choice of career. The school community also benefited from the project as children were developing skills, knowledge, attitudes, and understandings through being involved in the arts and working with the university students and teachers had extra assistance in their classrooms and learned new ideas in relation to implementing the creative arts.

These outcomes suggest that adding the fourth component of change to McCarthy's (2003) three basic, interdependent components of service learning of experience, reflection, and knowledge should be considered. As students, teachers and children were involved in the service learning projects, clear evidence of change was perceived in each of the participant groups, with the greatest changes being perceived within the students' lives, both personally and professionally.

One participant summed up the community service creative arts experience as follows:

I have created an image in my mind about my experience at the school: I imagine teachers, parents, university students and children all sitting at a big, round table. We all bring our own experiences and knowledge to the table, as we share these, we are all learning from each other. We are all equal and most importantly we are at the table for the same reason which is to bring positive change into each child's life. As we reflect on our shared experiences and our individual knowledge, we all agree that there is more than one way to teach a subject, more than one way to bring change into a child's life. We have all used the Creative Arts as springboards to create changes in ourselves and in the lives of children; these Creative Arts projects have been a success and everyone at the table is reaping the benefits of our community engagement projects. (ER)

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