



IMAG

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Making/Teaching ART Differently

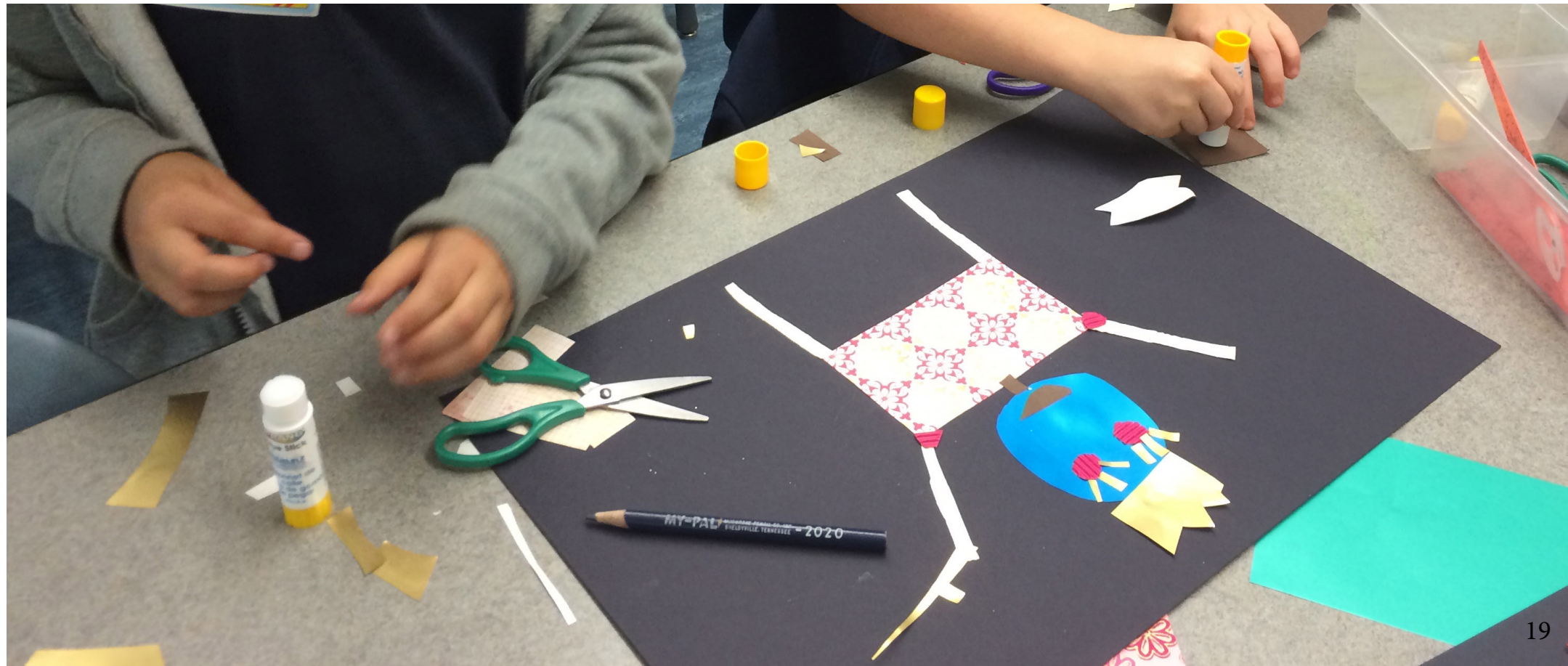
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Surprise! Learning to Communicate and “let go” through Collaborative Artmaking

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keywords:
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Abstract:

Collaborative artmaking can be challenging for many, especially young students who need to be taught strategies for effectively working together with their peers to communicate collective ideas. Active listening, negotiation, clear communication of ideas, and problem solving are essential skills teachers must first model (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006). However, the benefits of artistic collaborations are many, including active participation, pride in ownership, development of social skills and critical thinking skills, community building, multiple perspectives, and shared ideas for problem solving (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006; Roberts, 2009).



To excite students in Kindergarten and first grade about the prospect of working together to create collaborative collages, I learned from personal practice to reframe the project as an art lesson with a surprise ending, in which the outcome would be a mystery. Learning to be comfortable with ambiguity (Foley, 2014) is the foundation to my instructional approach for teaching all other collaboration skills, as it is a challenge I personally revisit often in collaborative artmaking endeavors I participate in.

After working for thirty minutes with a friend to create a collaborative collage about any subject or scene decided on together, I asked Kindergarten and first grade students to stop and find a collage started by another team to add to with their partner. This assignment was about developing visual literacy – learning how to construct meaning in works of art (Yenawine, 1997) – through collaboration and communication with someone else to visually convey a shared message. I will never forget the disappointed expressions on several students' faces as soon as I gave this direction. What I hadn't anticipated was the personal connection they had to the projects in front of them – and how not knowing about this request in advance to let go of their art and let someone else add on to it might make them feel a loss of ownership. Quickly reframing the project as one with a surprise ending, I was relieved to see their concern turn to excitement about this “mystery” project, in which the final outcome would be determined by their abilities to clearly communicate their intentions visually in the collage.



Teaching students how to collaborate

Collaborative artmaking can be challenging for many, especially young students who need to be taught strategies for effectively working together with their peers to communicate collective ideas. Active listening, negotiation, clear communication of ideas, and problem solving are essential skills teachers must first model (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006). In order for students to be successful in these areas, they need to understand how to resolve conflicts that may arise. Adams and Hamm (2005) recommend that students learn how to communicate feelings clearly using “I” statements, listen to partners to understand their perspectives, and avoid criticism on a personal level, instead discussing ideas critically for their value to the project. With teachers regularly modeling and providing myriad opportunities to engage in collaborative experiences, students will become more comfortable and adept at working together.

Comfort with ambiguity

Understanding that the final outcome of a collaborative project may be different than one originally anticipated is critical to staying open and flexible throughout the collaborative process. Foley (2014) describes this comfort with ambiguity as an inherent part of the creative process for many artists, noting that it is something we need to practice regularly as educators in order to teach our students how to be okay in not knowing the outcome right away. I often struggle with this myself in the collaborative projects I engage in, most notably the Round Table Postal Collage Project, started by Marty McCutcheon in 2011; the project is described as, “Assembled in working-groups of five members each, with each group arranged in a ‘circular’ sequence, participants will send and receive works-in-progress, and contribute to that progress. Each participant will be the Principal Author of one collage, and a Contributing Author of four others. (Postal-Collage Project No. 7, July 24, 2017).

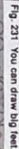
Round Table Postal Collage
Collaboration No.7, 2017-18



Round Table Postal Collage
Collaboration No.8, 2018-19



The ambiguity of the outcome was challenging for me the first time I participated in the Postal Collage project (No.7). While it was suggested on the website that Principal Authors might include a brief note describing any “expressive, strategic, or documentary information they wish to pass along” (Postal-Collage Project No. 7, July 24, 2017), none of my unknown-to-me team members chose to do so. In two of the collages, I was unable to construct much meaning, as there was minimal content depicted and no information provided to guide me. Not knowing their intended messages for their collages caused me a great deal of anxiety in the beginning, as I wanted to be sure my contributions aligned with their ideas. I also worried that my own collage, with brief but specific information about my process, would return to me far different than I hoped. Letting go and accepting the unknown outcome took some time, but it made me clearly aware of how those Kindergarten and first grade students felt in that moment, being told that someone else would be able to add to or change their work. While the Postal Collage projects differ in that verbal communication is not required, it also highlighted the importance of clearly constructing meaning visually when creating a work of art so that the audience will be able to read and understand it.



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Collaborative collages for developing visual literacy

The objectives of the assignment were for Kindergarten and first grade students to:

- Develop verbal communication skills to negotiate ideas with a partner to create a work of art
- Develop visual literacy skills to communicate ideas visually to others in a collaborative collage
- Construct meaning from other students' collages before adding to them
- Discuss the ways in which their collages changed after other students contributed to the work

Students were asked to create a collage about anything they and their partner agreed on, after discussing multiple potential ideas. Familiar already with the collage process, students were reminded about how to communicate clearly with their partners – making eye contact, being respectful, building on each others' ideas, listening actively, and contributing to the conversation.



We discussed several times the difference between combining ideas in one shared artwork versus dividing the paper so they could make their own independent collages in separate spaces.



Student conversations while working together

S3: I think they made this like a cloud but they wanted it to be blue.

S4: Yeah I think so, too.

S3: Yeah, and I think they tried to make the dog going into his house but they didn't have time to make the dog.

S4: Yeah, so let's do it!

S1: How about we put children on the playground and they want to go into a rocketship, and we can put the rocketship there? **S2:** And the playground!

S1: Yeah! **S2:** I'm going to do the swings.

S1: Which one [paper] should we use for the rocketship?

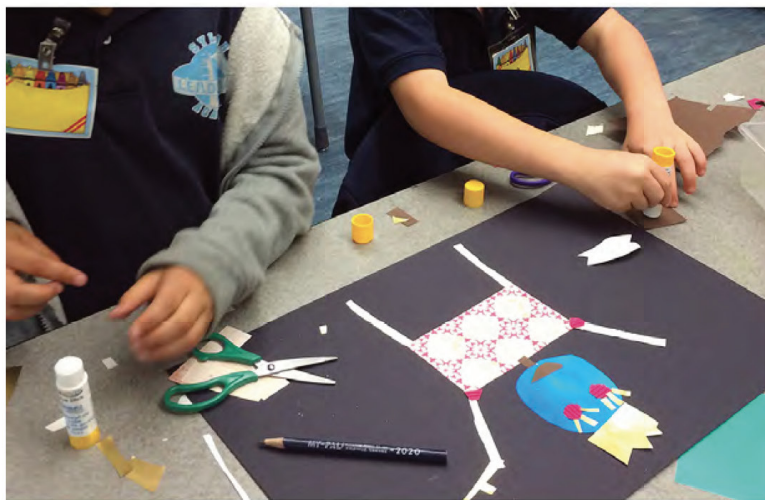
S2: How about this one? Let's make it a birthday rocketship!

S5: That looks like a bird to me, and I think that's a fountain.

S6: I think it's a water fountain for the bird...but I'm not sure about what is that?

S5: That's the roof!

S6: Oh! Yeah!



Once students collaboratively decided on their subject, they had thirty minutes to work together before being asked to stop. They were then asked to find another collage in the classroom to work on with their same partner. To alleviate the concerns clearly expressed on some students' faces, I quickly reframed the project as a mystery collage in which the outcome would be a surprise. However, before beginning on the next one, they had to "read" the artwork together to understand what the intended message or idea was. Strengthening visual literacy skills was critical to ensuring that students were mindful of the initial ideas presented by the originators of each collage. For some who struggled to construct meaning from the ideas depicted, choosing a new idea altogether proved to be common. Rather than asking the originators what they were trying to make, several pairs simply moved forward in a new direction. The collaborative process continued once more during the following art class, with students finding yet another collage to work together on. At the conclusion, we discussed the messages presented in all the collages, as well as the ways that ideas might have changed based on added elements or interpretations of the visuals.

The successes and challenges of collaborating

The benefits of artistic collaborations are many, including active participation, pride in ownership, development of social skills and critical thinking skills, community building, multiple perspectives, and shared ideas for problem solving (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006; Roberts, 2009). For these Kindergarten and first grade students, learning how to work together to produce an artwork based on shared ideas that clearly communicated their vision was both successful and challenging, and it resulted in each of these benefits in some way.

successes

lively discussions - what to create, what new components to add (strengthening students' social and critical thinking skills)

time spent reading and decoding the other collages before adding on (being mindful of others' perspectives)

evidence of excitement as students moved around the room to next collage (sense of community among students)

working together successfully by adding on to what their partners were creating or asking before gluing something down, (sharing ideas to problem solve together)



challenges

some struggled to construct meaning from another pairs' collage - ran out of time to glue their pieces down (possible solution: provide set timeframe for discussion versus artmaking)

some struggled to cut their shapes to clearly communicate their ideas (possible solution: more practice to strengthen fine motor skills)

some felt their collages were more unfinished than others; seemed less excited to talk about their work, possibly indicating a lack of pride in ownership or sense of accomplishment (possible solution: add more to finish it)

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