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Exploring Narrative Retellings to Better Understand the Circumstantial Intricacies of Service-learning

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Abstract

In this manuscript, the word “circumstances” serves as a conceptual lens through which to examine reflective vignettes of one university art educator and two art education undergraduates written in response to service-learning experiences at a local outreach Center for the homeless. Experiences included the design and teaching of art workshops to Outreach Center clients and the organization and exhibition of resulting artworks titled, *circumSTANCES*. The concepts, *communal stance* and *shared circumstantial space* are introduced and developed within the larger body of service-learning pedagogy. Participants’ short narratives or vignettes are represented and examined to reveal the intricacies of circumstantial experience which include roles played, conflicts encountered, the emergence of communal stance, and actions taken.

Introduction

Contemporary artist Beth Campbell's series of text drawings titled, *My Future Based on Present Circumstances* is described by Saltz (2002) as an "elaborate root system" (§ 2) of words which track the various paths Campbell imagines her life taking as she "stands at the precipice of a life decision" (The Public Art Fund, 2007, ¶ 3) or set of circumstances (see Figure 1).

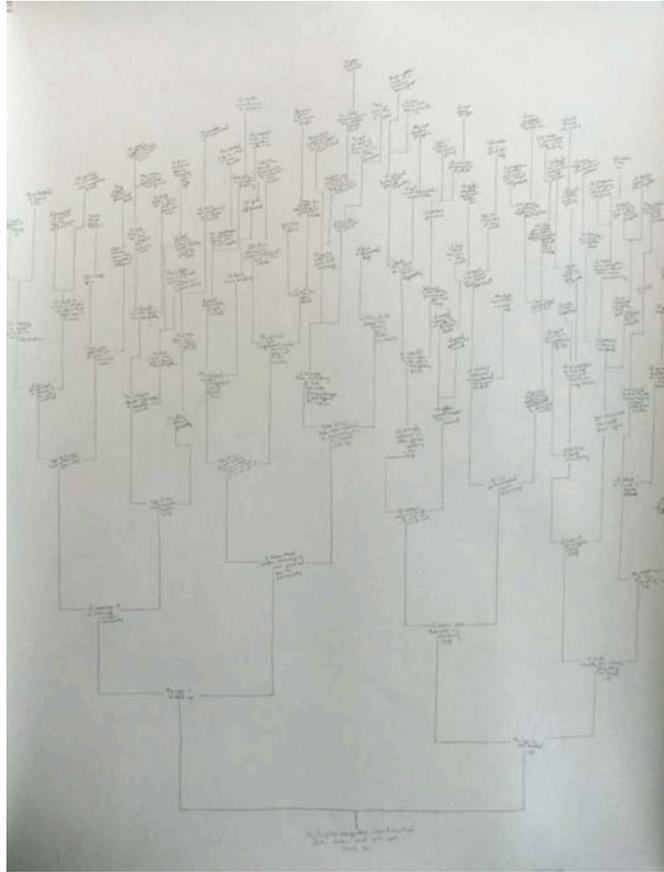


Figure 1. Beth Campbell's *My Future Based on Present Circumstances*.

As self-observations, Campbell's large drawings reveal how present circumstances or initiating situations might be reflected on or acted upon and multiple possible responses or reactions imagined based on decisions made which ultimately impact a potential future. Likewise, the drawing also reveals possible interactions with others such as a "boyfriend, or "parents" highlighting the intended or unintended existence of a relational presence across a circumstantial landscape of possible experiences. Campbell's "circumstantial" exploration highlights the reflective, imaginative, and communal aspects of human experience while at the

same time reveals endless possibilities for varying outcomes impacted by forces out of our control—positive and negative, generative and destructive.

The concept, “circumstances” served as inspiration for a series of arts-based service-learning projects enacted by me, a university art educator and Claire and Carol, two advanced art education undergraduates at a local outreach center for the homeless. During 2006 and 2007 we provided art workshops for residential clients at the center and curated two exhibitions of art work entitled, *circumSTANCES*. Exhibitions featured works created individually by ourselves and the clients as well as works created collectively. The exhibition first opened in the spring of 2006 at a local art center gallery and again in 2007 in a newly created gallery on the center campus.

Claire proposed the use of word, “circumstances” envisioning it as inspiration for our activities at the center and later as the title of our first show. She explained her interest in the word during one of our discussions:

We began to talk about how many of the people that were seeking assistance from this center had their lives changed due to unforeseen circumstances and that we are all victims of these circumstances (Claire’s narrative).

Claire’s ideas had special significance given the onslaught of multiple hurricanes that had devastated several regions of the state. At the time, we found the term intriguing because it highlighted the contextual quality of experience and “stance” alluded to a sense of agency or empowerment envisioned as a goal for our pedagogical actions at the center. Our intent was to provide opportunities for pedagogical practice and civic engagement with added aspirations to provide transformative experiences for all. Later on in an attempt to better understand the significance of our experiences, we each wrote short reflective narratives or vignettes that represented an experience or experiences we felt were particularly salient for each of us. In this manuscript “circumstances” is used as conceptual lens to explore these vignettes to better understand the intricacies of service-learning experiences.

Circumstantial Space and Communal Stance as Attributes of Service-Learning

The term, *circumstances* offers much to consider when examining the experiences and intentions of service-learning and socially just practice. The Oxford dictionary defines “circumstance” as: 1) the social, financial, political, or spiritual conditions in which someone lives. 2) The conditions that affect somebody’s life 3) an event or an occurrence 4) a condition which impacts future choices made and actions taken (p. 310). Further etymological exploration reveals four attributes of circumstantial experience that hold special relevance for service-learning. These include circumstance as 1) an existing situation or conditions 2)

conditions that affect a change, 3) “a circling around” (circum) and 4) “stand” (stance). Each parallel goals of arts-based service-learning that seek to inspire the creation of shared circumstantial spaces that are relational, creative, and reflexive--- all of which contribute to communal stance, agency, and action.

Here, the term *shared circumstantial spaces* is introduced and defined as those spaces--literal and figurative-- that bring together divergent groups of people for purposes of creating a greater good through creative activities that foster agency and action. Activities enacted in shared circumstantial spaces are shaped by confluences of diverse circumstantial experiences providing individual and communal opportunities for creative and critical explorations. Without relational intersections individual and collective views may remain undisturbed, shackled to individual or community circumstance, and consequently personal attitude and actions towards others may be ill-informed, misguided and lead to marginalization. Without creative activity such as art making interactions may become static or tied to dynamics of power and active opportunities for expression and voice are often unexplored.

Experiences shared in circumstantial spaces inform and challenge attitudes and beliefs, prompt reflection and inspire action and ultimately contribute to the continuous reconstruction of communal stance. *Communal stance* is defined as “an attitude toward” or stance taken in response to shared experience. Based on the commonly shared goals or the wellbeing of others, stance impacts future action. A Communal stance is a stance often taken in response to a conflict or tension, or what Dewey (1934) would refer to as a state of disequilibrium. Shared circumstantial spaces are infused with tensions that inspire reflection and action.

Service-learning as Opportunity to Alter Existing Conditions in Shared Circumstantial Spaces

With socially just practice in mind, service-learning becomes an opportunity to move beyond the “existing conditions” of circumstance to harness the transformative potential of the arts in community settings. Many in the field of education recognize the transformative potential of the arts to strive toward more socially just practice (Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark & Paul, 2010; Apple, 2006; Banks, 2006; Bastos, 2002; Berghoff, Borgman & Parr, 2005; Darts, 2006; Greene, 1988; Greene, 1995; Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002; hooks, 1994, 2002; Taylor, Carpenter II, Ballengee –Morris & Sessions, 2006). Those committed to socially just practice recognize that “existing conditions” or the status quo are often unacceptable, intolerable and even inhumane. They seek to reconstruct or transform existing conditions or circumstance through pedagogies that dismantle practices that distort, dehumanize, and disempower and replace them with pedagogies that inspire communal stance, inform actions and offer alternative possibilities.

When envisioned as a critical process for change, service-learning can provide students with distinctive opportunities to work in shared circumstantial spaces, to change the existing circumstances of their lives and the lives of others, to reflect, and to work toward communal stance and action. Conducted in diverse settings, service-learning venues are highly charged social spaces where participants assemble with varying circumstances ---life experiences, intents, levels of involvement, and purposes. Socially just practice values diverse lived experiences and encourages participants “to look at the peopled world, at the sufferings, the accomplishments, the perspectives and the concerns of others, at their twisty, dynamic movement through time and an awareness---sometimes joyous, but just as often painful ---of all that one finds (Ayers, 2006, p.83). Furthermore, service-learning encourages active engagement of learners in real-world spaces which challenge teachers and learners to step outside the confines of academic circumstances to enter into, at least to some degree, lives unlike their own.

Community settings have long been considered to be powerful spaces in which to enact socially responsive practices (Bastos, 2002; Dean, 1999; Stephens, 2006; Thomas 2007; Ulbricht, 2002, 2005). Many community based arts programs are conceived of as service-learning programs (Buffington, 2007; Hutzell, 2007; Jeffers, 2005; Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2004). While conceptualizations of service-learning vary, Taylor’s (2002) conception of service-learning as “transformative and socially reconstructive practice” (p.124) best supports the nurturing of shared circumstantial spaces that are social, transformative, and reconstructive. Taylor and Ballengee (2004) use a language of “we’ to describe service-learning highlights the importance of the development of reciprocal relationships. A reciprocal relationship exists when “teacher and student or service-learner and community agent are co-learners or co-workers” (Taylor, 2002, p.128) whereby the activities and actions of participants are co-constructed and communal in nature. This communal spirit is particularly meaningful when participants working in shared circumstantial spaces come to perceive points of connection between their lives as they work toward common goals and experiences through a range of processes.

Outreach Center as Shared Circumstantial Space

The outreach center could be described as a shared circumstantial space in that it functioned as not only a physical location but a social meeting space for me, my students and the outreach center clients. Located in the Deep South, a few miles from the university the Outreach Center campus is composed of a network of buildings which includes administrative offices, a distribution center for clothes and necessities, a multi-purpose meeting facility, a day shelter, a series of four residential homes, and a large warehouse structure at the back of the property. The center provides day and residential clients with necessities such as food,

shelter, and clothing. The term, “client” is used by outreach center administration and staff to refer to individuals who reside in small houses on the center campus and receive additional support such as job training, counseling, spiritual guidance, and other self-help workshops such as arts based workshops conducted by the art education program.

A white female, I grew up in the Deep South and had worked at the university for five years at the time of this series of projects. I had developed a sustainable and collaborative relationship with the center having previously involved my students in teaching and public art projects, there (Sanders-Bustle, 2010). Claire and Carol were eager and enthusiastic undergraduates who had been my students in past classes. Both had worked closely with me on previous projects at the center (Sanders-Bustle & Lalik, 2007; Sanders-Bustle, 2010) and had demonstrated a special interest in the ways that the arts can benefit the larger community.

Claire and Carol could be described as white, ‘non-traditional students,’ a term often used to describe those students who have taken less than traditional college paths. At the time, both were forty-something women working hard to put themselves through school. Claire moved to the south from New York and worked part time and attended college. She was a conscientious student who was the sole caregiver for her father who often participated in projects at the center. In addition to being an art education student Carol was a residential client at the Center at the time of the project. She grew up in the southern region of the state, had obtained an undergraduate degree in marketing from another university and had returned to school to obtain certification in art education. She had been a client at the center for several years and was simultaneously attending required self help classes and counseling sessions at the center while working toward an art education degree. Consequently she was in the challenging position of navigating the expectations of two institutions—the outreach center and the university. While Claire and Carol did not know one another well their paths had crossed at the center during past projects. The circumstance of their student lives collided with the requirements of coursework ultimately placing them at the center.

The majority of the twenty-five clients we worked with at the center were of low socio-economic status, needed financial and wellness services, job opportunities, and as center counselors determined spiritual counseling. This particular group was composed of a balance of men and women who lived in three very small houses located on the periphery of the center. Ages ranged from seventeen to early sixties. Given the sensitive nature of their situations we were given very little information about the clients that was expected and honored. What we learned about their circumstances came from details many shared willingly during workshops. It was not uncommon for the clients to speak of their struggles with addiction and their families. But, most of the time, we talked about shared topics such as food, music, and activities. Many worked all day at jobs arranged through the Outreach Center and

then were required to attend various workshops and self-help classes in the late afternoon. It was the Outreach Center's administration's belief that we offered art therapy and job skill opportunities for clients.

Once a week we met with the clients in a large warehouse at the back of the property for art lessons (see Figure 2). Without heat or air we were at the mercy of the weather and without water an outside hose and bucket were fashioned to meet our needs. At different times, both Claire and Carol had cleaned and organized the space to provide for an adequate and productive learning space. Tables were set up and old doors stood against the wall serving as easels. Large sheets of Masonite were placed on old risers upon which large collaborative assemblages were to be created.



Figure 2. Clients working in the warehouse.

The service-learning project brought individual and distinctive circumstances together in the Warehouse. On any other day or at any other time social paths may have not intersected. But given the new circumstance of the art lessons we found ourselves together in this shared circumstantial space working toward the common goal of making art and making that art public.

Art as a Means for Altering Existing Circumstances

Communal in the making or the shared representation of an ideas, the arts can drive the realization of a common purpose through a myriad of endeavors such as the creation of public art (Alexenberg & Benjamin, 2004; Anderson, 2000; Russell, 2004; Sanders-Bustle, 2010; Stephens, 2006), the development of an art program (Hutzel, 2007; Knight, 1997; Thomas, 2007), the raising of awareness (Empty Bowls, 2000; Guilfoil, 2004) and the evocation of memory (Cooper & Sciorra, 2001). In this regard, artmaking can serve as a powerful process for authentic engagement, personal connection, creative empowerment, and agency. With socially just intentions in mind, we carefully designed activities at the center to encourage agency, expressive freedoms, and respect. We understood that pedagogical decisions would impact experiences greatly. In the spring of 2006, in preparation for Claire's independent study we met to discuss her intention to provide a series of art workshops on the center campus. Claire outlined the particulars of the activities and she and I met with center administration to propose our ideas. The center embraced the proposal and consequently Claire organized and taught a series of art workshops on site at the center. With the exception of the first, workshops took place in a warehouse at the back of the center property which Claire, her father and I cleaned and organized to serve as a space for learning.

Beginning in March of 2006, workshops were held on Thursday evenings offering a choice of photography, videography, and painting. We knew that we needed to offer choices if the clients were to connect with the process or activity. Center staff members also acted as instructors--one leading explorations in photography using disposable cameras and the other leading explorations in videography by placing her video camera in the hands of participants. With my guidance, Claire selected a series of activities that would allow participants to express their ideas in ways that would not be intimidating. I also attended workshops and assisted Claire. Both of us participated in the art project alongside the clients whenever time allowed. As a client and an art education student, Carol was also present for many of the workshops. Artwork completed in the workshops was later shown at the "circumSTANCES" exhibit which was curated by Claire in April of the same year (see Figure 3) .

In spring of 2007, Carol picked up where Claire left off, designing and creating a new gallery on the center campus in the entry hall of a multipurpose building that functioned as a meeting place/ spiritual center. Carol collaborated with center administration and staff, designed the gallery space, budgeted and procured lighting and paint and was responsible for reassembling and re-hanging artwork from the first circumSTANCES exhibit. This opening took place in May 2007 in the newly created Outreach Center gallery designed by Carol.



Figure 3. circumSTANCES Exhibit.

Reflection as a Means for “Circling Around” Service-Learning Experiences

The prefix, “circum” found in the word, circumstance means “circling around” and can be used to represent the recursive role that reflection plays in service-learning and in teacher education in general. Educators have long valued reflection as an essential component of teacher preparation (Beudert, 2006; Blair, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Schon, 1987). Reflection is considered to be “the keystone of service learning pedagogy” whereby “students, teachers, and community participants are actively involved in constant production and reproduction of the service project through reflective discourse, writing, exhibition, and critique” (Taylor, 2002, p. 128).

Our work at the Outreach Center, though well-planned and well intended was challenged by a highly complex shared circumstantial space which made our experiences distinctive and informative provoking constant need for ongoing reflection. The recursive nature of reflection prompted constant dialogue among ourselves, clients, and outreach center administration taking the form of oral and written dialogue. In many ways the artmaking itself, became a prompt for reflection in its making and later in its public viewing. For example, a large 4’ X 8’ Rauschenberg inspired artwork resulted from the communal efforts of clients and ourselves working freely on top of and around imagery to create an honest representation of collective energies. The large piece of Masonite placed on risers 12 inches of the floor began bare. At the back of the room men sat in chairs flipping through old magazines. I wondered if they would ever leave their seats. Claire had provided an interesting lesson on assemblages and had

talked about Robert Rauschenberg's use of popular imagery, found materials, and his development of wonderfully layered surfaces. Finally, Claire and I went to the back of the warehouse and pulled out some old buckets of latex paint placing them beside the panel. I painted in a large area of red. Carol glued down a portion of a map. We moved on busying ourselves with others. Time passed. A little later a gentleman from the back of the room glued on a magazine clipping. I remembered wondering why he selected that particular image. Someone painted in a face, others glued on magazine photographs and the panel slowly evolved. Reflection took the form of religious commentary, conflict, hope, and struggles.

Reflection may take many forms and yield endless results and it is an essential process for understanding complex service-learning experiences. Jeffers (2005) likens the process of understanding service-learning experiences to "the project of weaving, of knitting together many voices, the many perspectives and interests, to produce a dialectical fabric that is folded again and again, yet is made meaningful, wrapped around a world of shared experiences, a world that is both revealed and rendered in the images and texts that are constructed by many" (p.15). The writing or telling of stories can be a very powerful means for re-constructing, synthesizing, and making sense of circumstantial experience. By telling one's story, existing circumstances serve as a starting point and are identified as they relate to oneself and others as characters, settings, and practice. Conflicts are revealed as characters react to existing circumstances and take steps to enact changes. At certain points, communal stances are taken and new opportunities or circumstances re-presented.

As a process for reflection storytelling offers transformative possibilities for our selves through interactions with others. Reflective and regenerative in nature, Gude (2009) links the process of telling one's stories to the making and re-making of self explaining that "telling one's story—representing self-experience—is more than simply re-presenting one's experience. Through the process of making and re-making the story, the image, the student/artist/maker makes self" (p.8). Consequently, the crafting of a story about experiences had in shared circumstantial spaces can serve as a process for connecting, synthesizing, or even problematizing personal experience or selfhood in relation to others and becomes a "means for exploring possible actions within concrete day-to-day situations that make up the moral fabric of our lives" (Johnson, 1993, p. 155). Consequently, the making of a narrative becomes a critical process for better understanding our selves in relation to others and our subsequent actions.

In essence, the making of a narrative, like the making of any other representation, may serve as a response to service-learning experiences revealing the communal stance while at the same time informing one's evolving self as a teacher. Johnson (1993) suggests that the telling of stories contributes to our reconstruction of understanding informing future choice and action.

“We live out narratives in our lives, we reconstruct them for our self-understanding, we explain the morality of our actions at least partly in terms of them, and we imaginatively extend them into the future” (p.155). Consequently, the crafting and telling of a story can remake understanding and in the field of service-learning, such stories can lead to transformation while revealing practice.

Revealing Circumstantial Intracacies Through Narrative

In 2007, interested in learning more about the particulars of our service-learning experiences at the Outreach Center, we took our reflection one step further. I contacted Claire and Carol to see if they would be interested in working on a National Art Education Association (NAEA) conference proposal related to their experiences at the center. Both agreed to participate. To prepare we spent time reviewing notes and journals and jotting down any ideas that came to mind. After much discussion at the first meeting, we realized that each of had unique stories to tell and decided to write vignettes, or brief evocative narratives that would experiences which were particularly salient. These vignettes served as yet another “circling” around of our experiences and represented a significant attempt by each of us to better understand and represent the details of our unique experiences.

The three vignettes were treated as written data representing salient service-learning experiences as told from the perspective of each writer. Analysis of the text occurred on two levels. First I sought to better understand the storyline behind each, to in essence, examine its plot. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) describe a plot as “a conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed” (p.7). To do so I performed a content analysis of each vignette whereby I read each, highlighted important ideas communicated while jotting concepts in the margins. Aspects of story common to each included roles played by each writer, the presence of conflict, and stances and actions taken by the writer. These are represented in written interpretations directly following each vignette.

Claire’s Story:

Pedagogy as Communal Stance in a Shared Circumstantial Space: A celebration

All human beings are affected by circumstances – sometimes fleeting, sometimes lasting. Circumstances can connect us or separate us. These art workshops and subsequent gallery exhibit sought to show how circumstances can act as inspiration for transformation and as vehicles through which we can “take a stance” as an individual or community of artists. When I reflect about these workshops I recall wonderful times with people sharing commonalities and experiences... with deep fondness.

The title of the workshops, which were held at a local outreach center, came about when my then professor and I were discussing the possibility of my writing a grant and being art director as an independent study project. After a long discussion about the possibilities of what direction this could go - - we began to talk about how many of the people that were seeking assistance from this center had their lives changed due to unforeseen circumstances and that we are all victims of these circumstances. Hence, the name of the workshops and subsequent art gallery show---circumSTANCES .

Being a community project it had the potential to reach clientele that could include persons who were homeless, in recovery, and some were unfortunately dealing with being relocated due to hurricane Katrina and subsequently Rita. One thing we all had in common was dealing with intense emotions and we were all in need of healing. This was a difficult time to see what had happened in the south, it was quite emotional for me, and I still had a roof over my head. Your life can change in a nano-second...circumstances... we are all victims and have to find ways to release the unmitigated shock we go into when this happens – however good it may be or bad.

The play on the wording of circumstances was exciting because not only are we victims of our circumstances BUT if we so choose - we are able to take a STANCE and become professors of our destiny.

I gave my first presentation for the workshops to a very reluctant crowd... but being the trooper that I am I did my best to motivate the crowd - - - I must add that I had the help of my trustworthy and dedicated professor, an exuberant photographer, and a very enthusiastic woman with a video camera. For these workshops, I specifically chose Mark Rothko's works because his color field paintings deal with emotion and Robert Rauschenberg's collage works because they are fraught with images, which can tell a story without a voice. Both of these artist's works would be easy to understand for the person who doesn't realize that they have the inner artists working within themselves and they have a story to tell and can't quite find the words. Use the art as your voice.

One sad but exciting fact of this... is that some of the workshop attendees had never held a camera (still or video), had no knowledge of the digital age, and most importantly had not ever seen themselves in a photograph - - had never seen themselves except as a reflection in a glass or someone else's eyes.

This center just happened to be the Parish's main site and official location for storing large donations for victims of the hurricanes (Katrina and Rita). It was a large and looming place, even kinda scary - - with our first walk through the building, we were aware that there were small animals some still alive and some not so alive. It held furniture, food, clothing, mattresses, and it actually seemed to be a dumping ground for people who wanted to clear out their house and now had what they thought as a good reason... how can one actually think that an old mattress or outdated medical supplies would do any good for a homeless person. What would you do, say perhaps... "Well, I know you don't have a home but here is a used mattress and an old door – oh and in case you hurt your back carrying them to your vacant lot here is some outdated aspirin – good luck finding water to take them with."

There was junk all over this warehouse – but there were also some treasures. I employed the help of my dad to clear out one aisle in this vast space in which we could turn into an art studio. I have to be honest; I had no clue of the circumstances, which were to come.

I should mention that this warehouse had no heat, no cooling, no bathrooms, or even running water. I must admit I was quite daunted at first because my idea or vision of an art studio was not what I walked into – what I walked into was a mess inside an extremely dirty warehouse and had to figure out how to make the best of the circumstances I was presented. Alas, we found some old jugs of water – great for cleaning our brushes for the painting, we found some bizarre tables that were about 5 foot by 5 foot and about 12 inches off the ground... we found these great industrial doors... The doors became our easels – the tables at one level were utilized to create the Rauschenberg inspired pieces and doubled up they worked as tabletops. It was quite challenging and took time but what was created for these workshops was the most unique area to work in – and this became our home every Thursday evening for the time we had for this community grant project.

The space became magical--- literally transformed into a frenzy of artists – I watched those who were so reluctant at first become totally immersed in the artwork and the creative process. We began to refer to ourselves as the Warehouse Artists. This was not only to overcome what could easily become a situation of us (the instructors) and them (the workshop attendees,) BUT more importantly, it was a situation of protecting the privacy of all involved. Share what you care and be an artist – see you next week – creating a safe place for expressing feelings was my main concern.

When it came time to go through the artwork for the curating the art show – it was hard to decide what should or should not be included. So, for the Rothko inspired paintings I displayed them all. For the Rauschenberg inspired pieces, I found a way to hang them all and there were four 4 x 8 foot panels. Photographs, well this was a bit harder because we had a plethora of photos and limited on space so we gave the artists and opportunity to pick 5 of their favorites and then pulled those which received the most selections. Then, there were only two days to prepare the gallery and put the show up and ONLY 4 hours to remove the show, which included spackling holes, sanding, and painting to prepare for the next show that was to inhabit the gallery.

When the reception for the Warehouse Artists began, the outreach center made sure to get everybody to attend – this included the artists and many guests... and they arrived to a reception with food, beverages, and desserts – but most importantly their artwork – hanging in a bona fide – for real – public gallery who was kind enough to donate the space for 5 days. Proud does not even describe the looks on all of our faces as we walked through this gallery – for most it was the first time they were in a gallery AND the first time they were validated in creating from the heart.

This experience was a study in tolerance, a work in honesty and an outlet for feelings. It changed my life and I am sure it touched each one of the Warehouse Artists. We were a family for the short – albeit intense – time that we spent together in the spring of 2006.

In this vignette, Claire positions herself as a teacher and a curator who, given an existing space, learners with diverse circumstances and freedom to design activities, proceeded to work within existing circumstances to create a shared circumstantial space. In a practical sense, Claire's service-learning experience provided her with ongoing opportunities to make decisions about content, instructional design, the selection of media and artists, the collection and organization of supplies, classroom management, exhibition and learner well-being. Existing conditions included the fact that her instruction needed to take place in a large 'dirty' warehouse with no running water and the fact that she would be working with learners who, due to their circumstances, were in need of respect and voice. Seen as challenges and in direct conflict with her pedagogical beliefs about adequate classroom spaces, Claire, with the help of her father, transformed the warehouse space into what she later referred to as a shared circumstantial space that was "magical". While the existing physical conditions and amenities appeared to be the greatest challenge, these challenges were overcome, not by the addition of

a sink or air conditioning, but by the spirit of the relational space she constructed. “Creating a safe place for expressing feelings” became her main concern.

To do so, Claire’s made pedagogical choices that were aimed at providing expressive and empowering activities. Using the art of Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg as inspiration for her workshops she hoped to help the clients find success and recognize the artist within, to “Use the art as [their] voice”. She felt that these artists would be accessible for her students and would allow them to explore the media in a non-threatening way while connecting in emotive ways with the process. In essence, Claire’s instructional decisions reflected a communal stance that had less to do with content and more to do with the wellbeing of her students.

In addition, conflicted by the center’s ongoing use of the term “client” to refer to the participants in the workshops, Claire worked hard to encourage reciprocity--- an important characteristic of shared circumstantial space and service-learning. Her concern was reflected in repeated conversations she and I had while working at the center. While we understood the centers’ need to refer to those who received services in some fashion, we often lamented over how that distinction set up an us/them scenario that we wanted to avoid. To resolve the conflict we began referring to all involved as the “Warehouse Artists” and continued painting alongside the clients throughout the workshops. We hoped these actions would further blur the line between teacher and learner and us and them. In essence, Claire’s newly constructed communal stances contributed to a more socially just shared circumstantial space.

Lynn’s story:

Power and Risk in a Shared Circumstantial Space: A Paradox

Over against the wall, mostly women work on large color-field paintings. Having no easels we taped pieces of gessoed canvas to old doors, which had been left in the warehouse. After a very brief discussion of the work of painter Mark Rothko, hesitantly the painters brushed their first strokes onto the canvas. We had talked about how layering could produce a luminous surface and how color and shape could evoke emotion. But beyond that, choices were left up to the individual. We encouraged risk taking and stressed the importance of not worrying about mistakes. “Its just paint...we can just paint over it.” I heard echoes of past painting professors as I said those words as if I tried to believe it. One particular evening I remember one young woman in her early twenties coming in and announcing that she needed to paint. She said this as a way of letting the group—instructors and peers--- know that she needed some time alone with the canvas. She silently yet vigorously laid layer after layer of paint down. She said nothing. She did, in fact, just need to paint.

Mark Rothko speaks about the significant role of expression in creative works. “I’m not interested in the relationship of color to form or anything else. I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on” (Prizel & Rothko, 2004, p. xxi). I think of this in relationship to the work we do as educators reminding myself that no matter how integrated, interdisciplinary, cross-curricular, or conceptual that we might get... No matter how much pressure art educators receive to be accountable... the very thing that makes art, art---human expression--- can never be overlooked or removed.

In a recent forum sponsored by the Modern Language Association, the novelist Toni Morrison argued that “certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so stupefyingly cruel, that---unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, rights, or the good will of others—art alone can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. It is the transference of human expression through media that makes the arts so powerful, it is also that aspect of creation that makes it so risky” (Corley, 2006,4). Rothko speaks of the love hate relationship inherent in making one’s art work public. He states, “A painting lives by companionship expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world (Prizel & Rothko, 2004, xix). I am reminded of this as we hang the deeply personal works of the warehouse artists on to the wall at the first gallery showing.

Sure, we gave artist the option of not showing and only a few made that choice, however many welcomed the opportunity to show at the local arts center. The work hung radiantly under the professional eye of the gallery lights mining the layers of color and pulling forth subtle plays of gloss medium. The professional, bright space brought yet another layer of importance to the warehouse project and further highlighted the sacred nature of art---especially those born of intense expression and trust. We understood that as artists, yet would come to realize the great value we place on creative works is not always shared by others, knowingly or unknowingly.

The exhilaration of a successful series of workshops and exhibit stayed with us. Yet, further situations would arise the following semester that would highlight the risky business of making art public. After the first showing of the artist works--Rothko inspired canvases, 2 large Rauschenberg inspired assemblages, a series of small experimental canvases, and a collection of photographs taken by the artists-- the show was carefully de-assembled and returned to the outreach center and handed to administrators for safe keeping. That was the last we saw of the work until it was time to reinstall the show in the newly created gallery on the center campus. When it

came time to reinstall the show, the work was nowhere to be found. In spite of continued declarations of memory loss and unknowing responsibility, the work was found in an un-air-conditioned warehouse where humidity had taken its toll. While most of the pieces could be cleaned and salvaged we realized that one of the large Rauschenberg's has been cut up and used for a back panel in a hutch created as part of an ongoing trash to treasure initiative by the university architecture program. We were struck by how this work could be dishonored in such a way. In many ways we were angered by how carelessly the work had been treated and it seemed tragic yet important that something like this had happened. However, the fast approaching show required that we put our concern on hold and re-hang the artists' work for a second showing. Consequently, not to be undone, Carol carefully nursed the works back to health, collected the remaining parts of the dismembered Rauschenberg and with the help of Audra and myself the show was installed for a second showing in the new gallery. The reconfigured Rauschenberg hung bravely as a series on a wall of its own.

In this vignette, I position myself as a person who is questioning my actions through a theoretical pondering of the theories that inspire the work that I do with my students. I place myself at the warehouse in the opening paragraph of the story and then embark on somewhat of a soliloquy or reassurance where theorists and artists become supporting characters for my beliefs and communal stances taken.

The conflict represented in my story centers on my frustration with the treatment of the warehouse artists' artwork by the center following the first "circumSTANCES" exhibition. While the intent, under my direction, had been to help participants experience the power of creativity and the sense of pride associated with making work public, we were suddenly confronted with the fact that the life of the work was not considered beyond the hanging. An internal conflict existed as I wrestled with the fact that I had encouraged creative engagement as empowering yet had also failed in my responsibility to make certain that the works were cared for. My attempts to provide a positive experience had fallen short. While unfortunate, this set of unforeseen circumstances resulted in the need to take a proactive communal stance which supported Carol's effort to restore included the and re-hang the work and led to a discussion about ownership and proper care with administrators, which took place but is not discussed in the story. The exhibition in this story served as a retribution for the mistreatment of the work and demonstrates how exhibitions can serve as communal stances of sorts whereby works are hung with respectfully to represent the individual and collective voices of a particular group at a particular time. Yet, as Carol's tale reveals this showing was not without its own risks.

Carol's story:***Exhibition as a Communal Stance: A Heroic Tale***

After the exhibit made its debut at the arts center, it was time for it to find a more permanent position in the community. The center decided to further their artistic commitment to the community by turning a lobby area of their central activities building into an art gallery. Originally, the building was home to church services, choir rehearsals, bible studies, and Christian fellowships. In an effort to begin to build unity within the community, the organization took the initiative to invite art into the spiritual arena.

So with the lobby walls repaired and painted, the ceiling replaced, and the track lighting installed the new gallery was ready... And for the first show in this newly created gallery we re-hung the original circumstances exhibit...together...myself, Claire, and Dr. B. . An opening was planned and publicized, the public came out to the event and the overall comments and reactions were extremely positive. The artwork created by the Warehouse Artists for the show circumSTANCES... had a new home.



Figure 4. Rauschenberg-inspired assemblage.

One of the ministers of a church service held in the building pulled me aside to discuss his concerns regarding the Rauschenberg inspired panels (see Figure 4):

“What where you thinking? I know you know better than this.

I can’t believe you have a Hooter’s girl (a magazine photo included in the assemblage) in the Church lobby, you know that is lustful and sinful!”

My response was:

“You don’t need an ID to eat at Hooters it is after all a family restaurant, so what is the big deal with “Nature’s Prozac” and the gentleman recognizing the beauty of God’s creation.”

The concept behind the Rauschenberg panels was an honest and direct response to what most of these young men were experiencing as they attempted to turn their lives around. They were working together to leave the wicked ways of the world behind and to and live a more spiritual life... what they were experiencing was a spiritual warfare between good and bad, right and wrong, holy and evil. Unable to talk or communicate verbally about how they themselves were feeling, they were able to do so artistically and were benefiting from the affects.

In addition, a (magazine photo) marijuana leaf posted on a cigarette pack with a headline about legalizing marijuana, which was on the cover of “Time” was included into one of these panels. If “Time” magazine could include it on their cover, why is it so inappropriate to talk about here?

My response was that I would not censor art, because the moment you begin censorship, art ceases and political or religious propaganda begins. Art is where one gets to express ideas freely and must always remain that way.

Censorship:

- 1. The act, process, or practice of censoring.*
- 2. The office or authority of a Roman censor.*
- 3. Psychology. Prevention of disturbing thoughts or feelings from reaching consciousness except in a disguised form.*

As a warehouse artist I included text panels that appeared in the circumSTANCES Exhibit which included a simple statement which always opens deep-seated debates, it simply said: STOP CENSORSHIP

Carol's multiple roles as a curator, art education student, and client posed significant challenges for her. In this vignette, she takes the role of the curator whose actions to hang a work of art in a community space leads to a direct conflict with a visiting pastor who finds the work which featured, "a hooters girl" and a marijuana leaf to be offensive. Despite an existing relationship with the pastor and the fact that she was a client at the center, she takes a particularly courageous communal stance supporting the work and expressing her beliefs about censorship. She posts a quote contributed by one of the clients that read, STOP CENSORSHIP on the gallery walls.

Carol's experience demonstrates how art exhibitions add another circumstantial layer to the space by inviting viewers to respond to the communal stance taken by not only the curator, Carol, but the work as well. While the show became a shared circumstantial space for giving voice to those less often heard it also challenged the beliefs of viewers and sparked conflict. Carol navigated between expectations from the center and those from her university coursework. Interactions with center administration regarding the gallery and the show were difficult as center administration continued to recognize her as a client. Carol's desire to take a stance in her response to the pastor and through the hanging of the show took great courage given that she would have to continue navigating both roles in the future.

Concluding Thoughts and Implications

The conceptual lens of circumstantial experience supports and aligns with attributes of service-learning as affirmed by the narrative vignettes which highlight circumstantial attributes which are transformational, reflective and empowering. Yet, further significance and implications are found in the intricacies and particularities related to roles played, conflicts navigated, and opportunities for the development of communal stance. Communal stance most closely aligns with the intent of socially just pedagogy as each person negotiated attributes of experience to arrive at co-constructed stances.

The varying roles played and perspectives taken by participants while shaped by existing situations can be enhanced by the kinds of activities, assignments, and opportunities teacher educators provide for their students. Consequently, the development of communal stance or impact on the shared circumstantial spaces is determined by opportunities allowed. Therefore service-learning activities must be designed with a variety of experiences in mind. For example, teacher educators might consider having students play different roles throughout the service-learning experience or create works based on the perspective or others. Considerations may also be given for role-playing across participants that would enhance communal engagement.

If reflected upon, service-learning experiences may challenge participants to more fully understand circumstantial intricacies so as to avoid assumptions, generalizations, and misrepresentation. These subtleties can be better understood by studying the varied representations of such understanding. While narrative functions as a valuable meaning making process and representation of service learning experience, it is only one way that participants make sense of their experience. Writing allows for the construction and representation of certain ideas as inspired and limited by the possibilities and constraints of written text yet other forms of representations may allow for additional or varying or imagined possible representations. For example, teacher educators might consider how meaning made through the creation of a collage might differ from that of writing a narrative.

While often challenging to navigate, conflicts and tensions play a valuable role in service-learning and are realized in diverse ways by participants. Each narrative depicted shared circumstantial spaces as exceedingly complex spaces wrought with tensions and conflicts. Both emerge as existing beliefs collide with the beliefs or practice of others or when assumed circumstances are impacted by conflicting circumstances. Conflict and or tensions serve as the sparking agents of transformation which can inform and haunt and at the same time lead us sometimes cautiously toward communal stance.

Negotiations across tensions and conflicts are unique to service-learning participants' experiences fostering varied responses. Consequently, the ways teacher educators talk about conflict in service-learning pedagogy is significant. This suggests that pedagogies might include varied and ongoing opportunities for participants to communicate tensions and conflicts unique to them personally while exploring their ideas in relation to the ideas of others. Furthermore assumptions cannot be made as to the kind of experience each student might have. I imagine using conflict maps or conflict webs to map out people, places, spaces, times and other factors with the idea of linking and making sense of a vast circumstantial web. Perhaps Campbell's circumstantial drawings might be used as inspiration for visual works to help us imagine possible situations and scenarios for future engagement and action.

Each narrative highlighted the ways in which exhibition functions adding yet another layer to shared circumstantial spaces created in service-learning. By making work public, the diverse lived experiences and voices of artists are communicated and shared with others. Artworks and public spaces serve as sites of power and when enacted in conjunction with activities constructed in community settings, shared circumstantial spaces are widened to include the reactions and responses of others. The exhibition, itself, as a collection of works is the result of a collective communal stance. Consequently the public sharing of works resulting from service-learning should be furthered explored as a valuable component of service-learning pedagogy.

In closing, if envisioned as dynamic shared circumstantial spaces, service-learning venues and activities can inspire and cultivate socially just pedagogies which include authentic opportunities to develop communal stances and actions that are transformational. Service-learning experiences should encourage “learners to go beyond the simple construction of knowledge into the realm of social imagination where new insights and relationships form and forever change the quality of life (Berghoff, Borgmann, & Parr, 2005, p. xiii). The fact that the vignettes reveal the unique particulars of experience, suggests that setting rigid predetermined outcomes for service learning pedagogy may stifle the construction of communal stance and limit the impact of the experience for student. Consequently, the processes encouraged and the choices and freedoms afforded students and participants in shared circumstantial spaces determine the value of experiences and the degree to which the experience transforms and evolves. Service-learning opportunities are envisioned by many to be valuable sites for socially just practice, yet there is much to be learned about particular qualities of experiences as a means for making service-learning opportunities stronger, more impactful, and transformative for all involved. The success of such programs is highly dependent upon continued efforts to re-conceptualize efforts, examine practice, and imagine possibilities for future action.

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About the Author

Recently, selected by the National Art Education Association as the 2011 Higher Education Art Educator of the Year, Lynn Sanders-Bustle is Associate professor of Art Education at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She holds an undergraduate and graduate degree in art education from East Carolina; her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Virginia Tech. She taught art in public schools working with students across the K-12 spectrum and is editor of the book, *Image, Inquiry, and Transformative Practice: Engaging Learners in Creative and Critical Inquiry Through Visual Representation* published in 2003 by Peter Lang. Sanders-Bustle has published in professional journals such as the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and *Art Education*. Her most recent article appears as a chapter in the NAEA publication, *Art Education for Social Justice (2010)*. In addition she has presented at the International Society for Arts and Education, the American Education Research Association, the National Art Education Association and the National Reading Conferences. Sanders-Bustle has received many grants including those supporting the integration of technology into instruction, faculty development opportunities, and community-based art projects. Sanders-Bustle believes that engagement with the arts strengthens the desire to learn in meaningful ways and fosters the ongoing development of individual and communal art making endeavors that spark imagination and illuminate possibility for one's self and others.

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