

The Transformative Power of Art

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Introduction

Art has power, and it is evident in the world all around us. From decades long ago in which art began social revolutions, such as Pablo Picasso and Diego Rivera's expressive works of socialist dreams, to more recent times when art exposes current social injustices, such as JR's works challenging preconceptions and breaking down prejudices, it is clear and evident that art truly has a power.

To be a teen in some of the inner city neighborhoods of Pittsburgh means to grow up in a world where the mindset imposed by poverty rules and there seems to be no escape from it. Poverty brings about a certain attitude that involves self-loathing and doubt in the existence of a future (Strickland and Rause 2007). Young people feel doomed to repeat the same poverty cycle, like the generations before. However, as evident by the success rate of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation, the cycle can be broken (Strickland 2007). Students that have been able to partake in the Manchester Bidwell after school programs have graduated high school and gone on to earn higher education degrees that ultimately lead to the ability to overcome the trappings of poverty (Strickland 2010).

Behind the Manchester Bidwell Corporation is a man that believes in the importance of helping others and the potential for growth of both urban youth and unemployed adults. Bill Strickland is a local Pittsburgh hero; he grew up in one of the toughest neighborhoods of Pittsburgh and was able to stay out of trouble thanks in part to his high school ceramics teacher. Through ceramics, Bill transformed from a calloused poverty ridden kid, to someone who had aspirations to get out of the neighborhood and better himself. He went on to the University of Pittsburgh where he set up a pottery studio in his neighborhood for the local children, because he had realized the power art had had on him and could potentially have on others (Strickland and Rause 2007). Through innovation and dogged perseverance, Bill went on to expand his vision and created the Manchester Bidwell Corporation. What Bill saw, and what no one else had seen before, was the simple and honest truth: Beautiful spaces create beautiful people. If trust is to be expected, then trust must be given. All human beings are capable; some may just need to be reminded that they are (Strickland 2007).

The Manchester Bidwell Corporation offers diverse programming in order to create empowering educational environments for adults-in-transition at its Bidwell Training Center, as well as urban and at-risk youth at Manchester Craftsmen's Guild (MCG). Through MCG, after school arts programs are provided in various artistic fields. Through the Bidwell Training Center, technical and trade-focused classes are offered, ranging from culinary arts to medical technicians. The Manchester Bidwell Corporation is located in the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh, with the purpose of enriching all of Southwestern Pennsylvania, and has been replicated under different names in centers around the country and the world (Stuart 2010).

Positive social changes for the youth have the ability to have profound effects on the rest of their lives (Ballerini 1997). If a positive event occurs in the life of the young, it has the ability, especially if it reoccurs, to become a catalyst filled with constructive and nurturing energy. This energy can then become so dynamic that youth have the ability to propel out of

disadvantage and into success and freedom from the “poverty mindset” (Strickland and Rause 2007).

Art can be part of this catalyst. It has a central role in opening the door for positive changes as it instills within the young person a sense of self-worth, confidence, and ownership of his/her actions. All of these transformations ultimately help create momentum for him/her to overcome any disadvantages he/she may face, such as large income disparities or racial prejudices.

Important to this project was the students’ ability to become empowered through MCG and its art programs and the positive changes they were going through and the role art played in their lives to help bring this change. The transformation was not only evident within them but also within the Pittsburgh community. MCG was able to use art as a tool to engage at-risk students and to propel them towards success within their own lives (Strickland 2007).

The success stories of students that have gone through MCG, in and of itself, call attention to how powerful involving kids in after school art classes can be, and bring forth the question of what other transformations within the students themselves the art classes made. Do the students see their own transformations, not only tangible things like their academic achievements, but also their outlook on life and their potential future? Do they feel that through art they have been changed, and if so how? These are the questions that needed to be answered in order to be able to truly give an explanation of how powerful and transformative art could be to students, and in the broader sense, to everyone.

Methods

The Community Based Research Fellowship program at the University of Pittsburgh Honors College allows students to apply the research process to pertinent issues within the community. During the course of a semester, the student researcher works with a community partner to explore and address issues that are important within a particular community setting, with the ultimate research goal of promoting actions for positive social change. A faculty mentor also guides the student researcher along the process. The fellowship gives the student a semester stipend and requires weekly interdisciplinary seminars to discuss aspects of the project as well as learn about what it means to enact social change. Six to ten fellows are chosen each semester from a wide range of academic backgrounds and interests in order to foster a group that is able to approach problems and talk about issues with an interdisciplinary view. The students, under the advisement of the faculty mentor and community partner, make all research plans and decisions.

The Community Based Research Fellows are students that are passionate about working within their communities to improve the circumstances of the people living in them. However, a crucial component of the fellowship, and in turn the fellows, is to approach the community they are working with on an equalitarian level versus as an authoritarian figure. The goal is not the fellow to be the only one benefiting from the project, but that ultimately the community benefits as well.

In order to be selected as a fellow, a community partner and a faculty mentor have to be chosen. I had discovered MCG earlier in the semester when Bill Strickland came to campus to give a lecture on social justice within the Pittsburgh community. As Bill described MCG, I realized the potential to create a project that provided tangible evidence of the force empowerment art has on students. I approached Bill about the idea and he showed genuine interest. Bill introduced me to two other members of the Bidwell Corporation that helped make

the research project possible. Dave Deily, Vice President of MCG, and Paulo Nzambi, COO of Manchester Bidwell, worked with me to edit the project proposal so that the project answered the research questions but also advanced MCG's objectives. Delanie Jenkins, Chair of the Studio Arts Department, was picked as the faculty mentor. She had previously been involved in many conversations about my desires to pursue socially conscious art projects, and had experience with using conversations to create artwork. This experience would become invaluable when trying to interview the students at MCG and when facing the unprecedented challenges.

The research project entailed collaborating with MCG's current students in the after school apprentice training program that involves art programs, to gain insight and answers to the research questions. In order to achieve this, I first had to become a familiar and trusting face for the students participating in the program. This needed to be done for the purpose of: not disrupting their work process, participating in the community rather than engaging paternalistically, and obtaining honest and insightful answers to the questions. Volunteering in the ceramics studio one day a week Monday through Thursday and also volunteering in the open studio times on Fridays enabled integration. The afternoons within the studio were spent getting to know each student on an individual basis by working with them and learning from them new techniques such as "throwing a pot," which means making a pot out of clay using a clay wheel to create the form. In having the students directly teach the skills that they had already mastered, it redistributed the power role between them and me. As the semester progressed, the relationship with the students became much more collaborative and authentic. There were students from all walks of life, from across the city and even across the world, each with a unique personality, story, and laughter that ultimately blended together to fill the studio with a melodious whirr.

After establishing relationships with them, the next step was to begin conducting a series of "interviews" with students that were willing to truly share their experiences. The "interviews" were to follow some guidelines with specific questions asked, but also unstructured enough that it would not impede the flow of a natural conversation. The conversations were to be taped on a phone in order for the act of conversing and divulging to be as natural and unassuming as possible, yet to still have data to reflect back on and analyze. Clearances and parent consent forms were distributed to gain permission to record the students. The recordings were then going to be edited to create a sensory collage with the students' verbal responses that would be exhibited side-by-side with some of the work the students had made throughout the semester. The goal was to present this installation in a gallery space that featured the students' voices and work in order to inform the public of just how important and transformative art could be to youth.

However, due to the bitter winter, many MCG classes were cancelled and opportunities were missed to get the recordings done. Also, due to the short time frame of the project, the set back of the cancellations, and lack of recorded data had endangered the project from coming up empty handed. With the lack of recorded data, yet wanting to have something tangible to show for the research done at MCG, a second idea was quickly implemented: asking the students four simple questions and having them answer anonymously on a piece of paper in a word or short phrase. The questions were worded simply, but left a lot of room for interpretation so that each student could respond in a way that was true to what each was experiencing and internalizing.

The set of four questions asked were:

1. What do you like about MCG/What is the best thing about MCG?
2. What do you like about art/ceramics?
3. Do you think art is transformative?

4. Do you think art has transformed you?

The answers to the questions were then incorporated into four separate collages representing the four questions asked. They were then Xerox transferred onto copper plates to be etched in order to create prints. Yet, due to the low contrast and propensity for the handwritten letters to be too thin to properly ink, a new idea surfaced of directly printing onto the paper with the Xerox transfer. Further development of this idea meant printing on 3D surfaces that led to printing the word collages directly onto the ceramic bowls made during the semester at MCG.

Wanting to make the final presentation of the work feel more collaborative, the proposal to use MCG student-made bowls was presented and will be carried out in the fall semester due to a lack of time this semester to finish it. Also in the fall, the printed word collages will be done with specialized ink that can be fired in the kiln so that it becomes a permanent part of the piece.

Results

For Question #1 (What do you like about MCG/What is the best thing about MCG?), students talked about MCG being a place to “meet people you can relate to” and “people that make you feel comfortable.” One student spoke of MCG giving him/her “freedom” and “helping them[me?] let go.” For Question # 2 (What do you like about art/ceramics?), one student spoke of art as being a vessel to “be yourself.” Another spoke of art being “therapeutic” and “making you feel so much better.” Question #3 asked if art can be transformative, many students asked what it meant exactly by transformative. One student mentions, “Art allows for feelings to come to life.” Another says, “Yes, I do believe art is transformative. Just by looking at it, you can change your outlook on life or society.” For the last question asking if art transformed them, one student wrote, “Of course art has changed me. I speak and express myself. I make friends.” Another wrote, “It made me see things differently. I get to experience new things.”

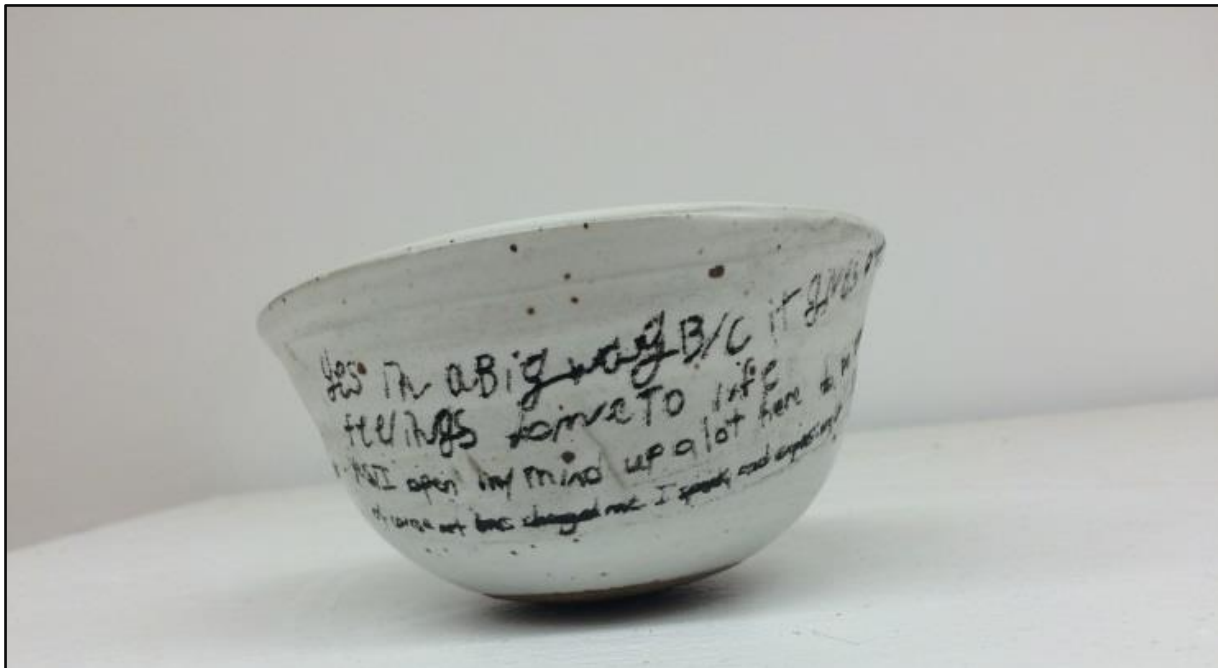


Image 1: Image of one of the printed bowls with word collage from Question 4

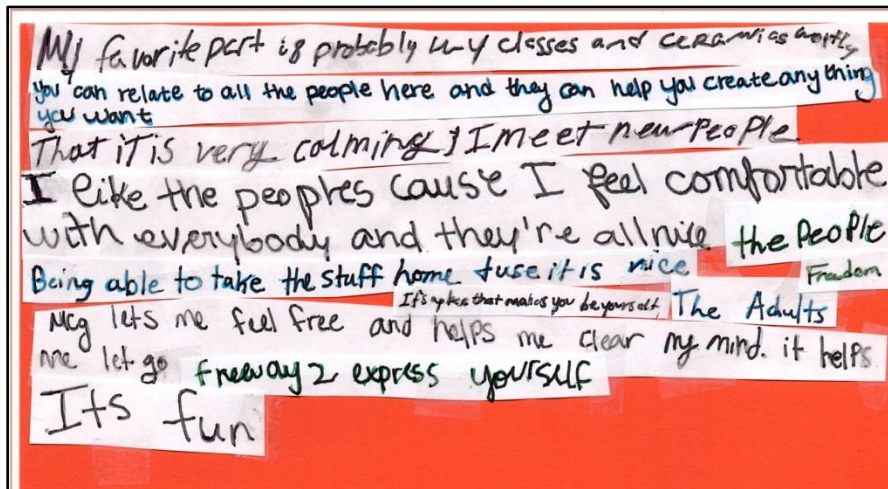


Image 2: One of the word collages created from the student responses from Question #1

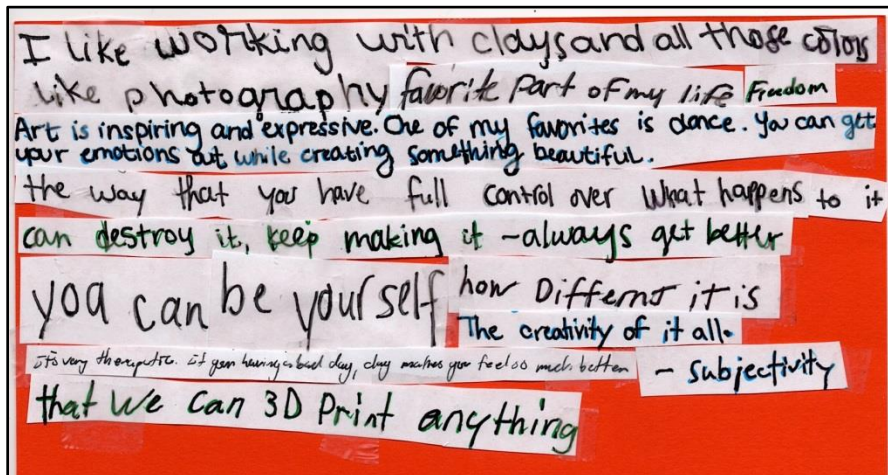


Image 3: One of the word collages created from the student responses from Question #2

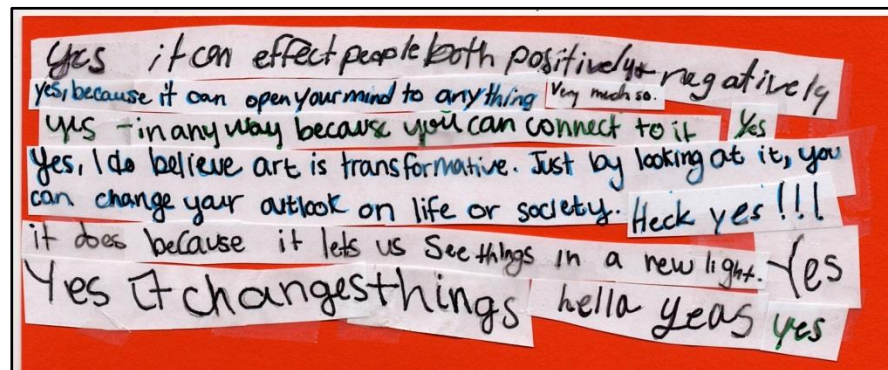


Image 4: One of the word collages created from the student responses from Question #3

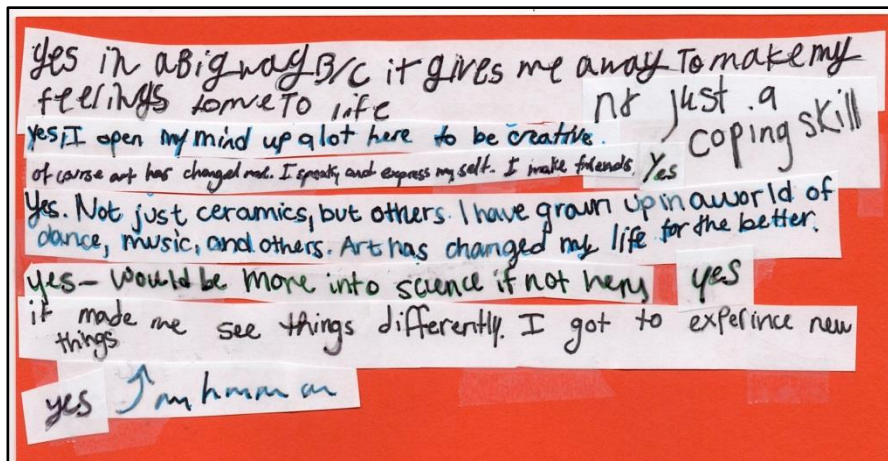


Image 5: One of the word collages created from the student responses from Question #4

Discussion

The responses collected from the surveys spoke of art, MCG, and transformation in varied ranges. Some responses were comical and very much characterized the social aspects MCG and ceramics represented for these students. Yet, other responses were very open and genuine in a more serious manner. The rawness of their responses and willingness to share their stories is incredible. Students shared that they had gone through immense transformations that had made their lives better and enjoyable. They recognized the change in their lives and they attributed it to art and MCG. The awareness that art had made positive transformations was clear to them and to me.

The responses for Question #1 (**Image 2**) show the value the students place in MCG and how welcome and safe they feel in the space. It also shows the sense of community the students feel at MCG and how important that community is for them. Question #2 (**Image 3**) further shows the value the students place in being able to participate in art and the value itself they place and see in art. Question #3 (**Image 4**) begins to get at the main goal of the research project, which was to identify if art has been transformative for the students. The students begin to share their thoughts on how art can change things, help things, and ultimately affect both life and society. Lastly, in Question #4 (**Image 5**) the students really answer honestly if they think art has transformed them. In their reflections it is evident that they are conscious of the fact that art has affected them in a positive way. They give examples of how both personally, academically, and socially art has enabled them to make positive transformations.

Ultimately, with the responses to all the questions, the beauty and importance that each word represents is tangible. Every bend and curve of every handwritten letter holds so much power. It represents the truth, the emotions, and the story that each student had faced up until the moment when the answers were written. The words and their work combined to give a vividness and realness to their transformations.

From the beginning the students were very open to the idea of this research project. They often times opened up and explained their circumstances and how what they were doing – working with clay – had changed so much for them. They spoke about their futures and goals to go to college either to study art and/or other subjects. The students carried themselves around with a sense of purpose and dignity that many times eludes teenagers, especially those from

underserved public schools. The students had become masters of their craft through hard work, perseverance, and the full support of the staff at MCG.

In the time spent at MCG, it became apparent through observations truly how transformed the students had become by continuously coming to MCG for art classes. This transformation was so evident that it was obvious when a student walked into the ceramics room whether he/she was new or had been coming for a while. It was not just that the veteran students knew where everything was and knew how to throw pots; it was much more than that. The veteran students were self-confident, they spoke clearly and confidently about themselves and their projects, and they did things as simple as standing straight and looking people in the eye when talking to them. The newer students were reclusive, often times hunched over and unsure that they could ever be good enough or smart enough to figure out the art of ceramics. Yet, as those students kept coming back, their voices became more confident, their smiles bigger, their shoulders straighter, and heads held higher.

These observations, along with the artistic representation of them on the word collages, helped answer the question that art is in fact transformative for the students at MCG and exactly how it transforms them.

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