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Christopher Olubunmi Adejumo

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## Promoting Artistic and Cultural Development Through Service Learning and Critical Pedagogy in a Low-Income Community Art Program

Christopher Olubunmi Adejumo  
University of Texas at Austin

*In this article, I describe how art instruction in a community art program was made more meaningful by relating pedagogy to real-life events in the community. The article discusses programming activities in the Children of the Future (COTF) art program at Sawyer Recreation Center, located in a low-income housing project historically known as Poindexter Village in Columbus, Ohio. The observations discussed here were made in my longitudinal study of COTF at Sawyer between 1996 and 2006. The program's activities included studio art production, community service, and participation in local cultural events.*

### Theoretical Framework for the Children of the Future Art Program at the Sawyer Recreation Center: Service Learning and Critical Pedagogy

The Children of the Future (COTF) art program at Sawyer Recreation Center is located in a low-income housing project historically known as Poindexter Village in Columbus, Ohio. In this essay, COTF's philosophy of facilitating change through art and cultural activities in designated communities is discussed within the theoretical framework of service learning (Frumkin et al., 2009; Perkins-Gough, 2009; Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmier, & Benson, 2006). The goal of service learning as a method of instruction is to involve learners actively in providing their community with needed services while simultaneously facilitating their educational development (Scales et al., 2006). As a result, service learning is reciprocal and mutually beneficial for both the community and the learners (Frumkin et al., 2009). Some of the multiple strategies employed in service-learn-

ing processes include perception, collaboration, production, dialogue, reflective analysis, and evaluation. Based on the attributes of these strategies, service learning in art education programming is at a premium in providing learners with profound understanding of art concepts, development of their intrapersonal thought processes, and increased knowledge of their community and its needs. Structurally, service learning is tacit, as it connects knowledge acquired through formal instruction with experiences gathered informally during community service. Engaging in experiential learning through community service has transformative potentials for participants, in that pedagogy becomes more meaningful on a personal level. For participants involved in service-learning programming, community service experiences enhances their self-esteem, pride in their community, and enthusiasm for participating in future community development projects (Adejumo, 1997).

Effective participation in community service, while learning multiple things simultaneously, also requires analytic and critical thinking skills. Sawyer art program instructors used an inquiry-based approach to teaching for the purpose of encouraging participants to ask causal questions, seek analytic answers, and propose practical solutions, as highlighted in the environmental cleaning activity discussed later in this essay. A primary goal of adopting critical pedagogy (Freire, 1984; McLaren, 1998) in the Sawyer art program was to encourage participants to ask questions about the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that impact their everyday life in community. In explaining the benefits of using critical pedagogy in art instruction, Addison (2000) maintains that it is

through critical and contextual study that a web of ideas can be constructed enabling pupils to unite the seemingly disparate approaches and dimensions of their lessons: technical, aesthetic, social, personal. . . . The term critical and contextual . . . indicates a reflexive process in which making and understanding (production and reception, encoding and decoding) are held in a symbiotic relationship where both are responsible for the construction of meaning. (p. 228)

Through critical pedagogy and community service, Sawyer art instructors sought to facilitate social awareness and activism as imperatives of self-empowerment in a democratic society. Learning activities in the program were characterized by open dialogue and structured reflection. This approach enhanced thoughtfulness and self-expression among youth participants as narrated in this essay.

### Method Used in Conducting the Study

The primary method used in conducting the longitudinal study of COTF at Sawyer Recreation Center was *participant-observation*. Longitudinal studies entail repeated observations over extended periods (Reynolds & Ou, 2004). In education, longitudinal studies are often used for measuring patterns of development or effective

instruction in learning environments (Flowers & Lamont, 2008). Concluding information in the study was gathered by telephone interviews. Participant-observation is a traditional component of fieldwork procedures. Its diverse approach includes observer, limited observer, privileged observer, and active participant, making it difficult for researchers to give it a singularly encompassing definition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The mode of participant-observation used in the study was *active participant* (Wolcott, 1988). This method was chosen to facilitate direct recording of learning activities in the art program, and to gain veracious insight into the ideas and feelings of participants and instructors through perception and informal interviews. On the advantages of informal interviews, Wolcott (1988) asserts,

Ranging as it does from casual conversation to direct questioning, informal interviewing usually proves more important than structured interviewing in an extended study . . . being on the scene also facilitates getting information from people reluctant to provide a structured interview but willing to talk casually to a neutral but interested listener. (p. 196)

My interaction with instructors and participants in COTF began when I worked in the program as one of the three college trained art instructors working in the COTF program from 1994 to 1996. I left COTF in 1996 to establish a new community art program at the Martin Luther King Jr. Arts Complex, also located in Poindexter, Ohio. While working at Sawyer, I became curious about the impact of the program on the artistic and cultural development of participants, and, in early 1996, I obtained permission from the Greater Columbus Arts Council (GCAC) to study the program. The initial study was conducted between 1996 and 1997 and was published as my dissertation, “Youth Development Through a Community Art Program: An Ethnographic Case Study” (Adejumo, 1997). The second phase of the study, which was conducted between 1998 and 2006, examined the program’s pedagogy, community service, duration, and aftermath. I observed the Sawyer art program on an average of 2 days every week between January of 1996 and August of 1997. Further observation of the program was conducted for 2 weeks every summer from 1998 to 2002. Between 2003 and 2006, I conducted 18 informal telephone interviews with COTF instructors and Sawyer staff members to learn about new developments in the art program.

### Historical Background and Goals of the Community Art Program

The COTF at Sawyer was one of 11 similar programs located in recreation centers in low-income neighborhoods across Columbus. Local artist Jim Arter established the first COTF program at the Sullivant Gardens Recreation Center in Columbus in 1993. Arter funded the program with grants from the City of Columbus Recreation and Parks Department and from the Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

Drug Elimination Program. In 1994 he approached GCAC for additional funding to expand COTF to other recreation centers in the city. GCAC accepted Arter's proposal and assumed the expansion, restructuring, and management of COTF. According to GCAC (1994), the primary goals of the restructured COTF were to

1. Expose participants to beneficial art activities that would complement their art experiences in school.
2. Provide participants with a safe environment for positive learning and social activities during after-school hours, and out-of-school periods.
3. Provide participants with a forum to interact with positive role models within the community.
4. Facilitate participants' involvement in social and cultural activities within the community.
5. Encourage participants to practice environmental upkeep as service to community.
6. Provide participants with avenues to learn vocational skills as a means toward a productive life and good citizenship.

These goals were designed to provide solutions to some of the widespread problems confronting children living in low-income neighborhoods in Columbus, such as juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, vandalism, low-self esteem, and indifference to community welfare. In 1995, GCAC secured an annual grant from the Americorps program for the expansion and sustenance of COTF. That year, COTF was extended to 10 additional recreation centers in the city, and the number of COTF instructors was increased from 1 in 1993 to 33.

During the period of this study, about 98% of participants in COTF at Sawyer were African Americans, and the other 2% were Caucasians. The director of Sawyer Recreation Center, Ron Williams (1997), stated that most of the art program participants were from low-income families, with several of their parents on federal economic assistance through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The ages of participants in the COTF art program ranged from 5 to 16 years, and approximately 90% of them were female. Although there are no established reasons for this gender disparity among participants in the program, I observed that about 99% of participants in the sports programs at the Sawyer Recreation Center, which included basketball, track, and boxing, were male.

### Promoting Artistic and Cultural Development

Poindexter Village is widely regarded as the nucleus of African American artistic and cultural activities in Columbus (Williams, 1997). Based on its location, COTF at Sawyer was at a premium in accessing and perpetuating diverse African

American artistic and cultural traditions in Poindexter. Art programming was conducted at Sawyer from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. every Monday through Friday, on a year-round basis. Youth participants in the program contributed to the planning of weekly programming by suggesting specific projects and activities, some of which are discussed in this essay. I characterized this approach to art instruction as “decentralization,” explaining that “[i]n a decentralized classroom, the teacher becomes a partner who initiates learning and provides support as needed, but does not inhibit intuitive knowledge and innovative thinking in the process of performing these duties” (Adejumo, 2002, p. 8). Ferguson (1980) proffered a holistic and transformational view of decentralized classrooms in her observations: “The greatest re-form of education may be ‘decentralization,’ the dismantling of the windowless walls that have closed off school from community, from the milieu of real life” (p. 317). The decentralized service-learning activities observed at COTF at Sawyer were based on the philosophy that learning in art should not be removed from the real world of experience (Williams, 1997).

One of the Sawyer art projects that addressed participants’ experiences in the community, as observed in 1996, was titled “Building a New and Safe Community.” This art project was conducted to help three youth participants in the program respond positively to a fatal incident that affected their family. One of the program instructors, Victor Johnson (1996a), recounted the participants’ ordeal:

There are some young boys that come frequently to the Center. . . . One day, tragically, an older cousin they were close to was shot and killed. While the adults in the family were trying to cope with what to do, they sent the boys to our program to keep their minds occupied. They were, of course, very upset and angry when they came in. One talked about getting even, another was fearful of what would happen if another relative tried to get even with the killer, and one kept talking of wanting to die; he wished he could hurry up and die. He wanted to kill himself. We were able to talk to the three of them and calm them down; they eventually participated in the art activities we had that day. (p. 2)

The Sawyer art instructors responded to the tense situation by changing the day’s scheduled programming activity from drawing to a community design project in mixed media. According to Johnson (1996a), the purpose of focusing the day’s activity on the community was to provide the troubled participants with a forum to address their anger productively by taking part in the design of a better and safer community. The project started with a group discussion on how to address the high crime rate in Poindexter. One participant suggested that it was the responsibility of the Columbus Police Department to solve the crime problem, and another posited that the prevalent dealing and consumption of illicit drugs in Poindexter was responsible for the high crime rate in the community.

The participants exchanged ideas about what should constitute the contents of the community design project and moved most of the art-room furniture to the hallway to create an open space on the floor for the project. They were given colored chalks for freehand drawing of the design layout. Approximately 15 participants worked simultaneously on the design, moving from one part of the project to the other as they contributed ideas and features to its development. Following the chalk drawing, participants were given various supplies, such as construction board, cardboard, Styrofoam, sticks, masking tape, paper, and colored markers, for the completion of the design. The finished project appeared three-dimensional as infrastructures such as schools, a public library, restaurants, and a shopping mall were integrated in the design. Pedestrian routes were mapped out in a manner that made it possible for children to avoid what one of the participants described as known “gang hangouts.” The size of the finished project was approximately  $12 \times 8$  feet and was completed within 3 weeks of programming.

A group analysis of the project was conducted upon its completion, during which participants reflected on its process and outcome. One of the female participants indicated that she would like to add a tree house to the design, stating that she had never seen a tree house before and would like to play in one. In response, the program instructors suggested that a section of the community design should be painted on canvas as a group project, with a tree house integrated into the painting.

The community design project just described was used to reinforce the need for participants to be mindful of personal responsibilities and safety within their community. It provided the three distraught boys whose family loss inspired the exercise with a practical and productive avenue to address their anger over the murder of their cousin. It is difficult to determine whether the exercise will have a long-term impact on these three boys. However, at the conclusion of the art project, their initial antipathy appeared to have been replaced with outward calmness.

In April 1997, I observed another group activity in the Sawyer program, in which participants cleaned the immediate surroundings of the center. The activity was initiated by one of the instructors who noticed that overfilled garbage containers in the Poindexter area were left unattended for extended periods. The instructor discussed the problem with youth participants, emphasizing the importance of environmental stewardship (Lankford, 1997). The instructor informed participants that youth service is an important aspect of community building and explained that youth who participate in community service are likely to continue such civic engagement as adults. Following the group discussion, the instructors and participants walked around the neighborhood, picking up litter and putting it in garbage bags. Greater Columbus Waste Management was later consulted for assistance with appropriate disposal of the garbage collected. The cleaning exercise

was a temporary solution to an ongoing problem of environmental neglect in Poindexter. Participants in the activity demonstrated civic responsibility and good ethics by taking action on the community problem.

The environmental cleaning exercise just described did not include an art project or the discussion of environmental artists as is typical of such activities in school and community art programs; instead, participants had a reflective discussion about its outcome, during which they recounted their individual and collective contributions to the undertaking. Participants' accounts included assisting one another in the cleaning exercise and asking their instructors for directions. The participants unanimously agreed that the project had a positive environmental impact in the neighborhood.

As a complementary project to the cleaning exercise, participants in the art program adorned the pavements of Sawyer Recreation Center with elaborate chalk drawings. The focus of this activity was to produce drawings inspired by their art experiences at home, COTF at Sawyer, and in school. Subjects represented in the drawings included household pets, play inventions, landscapes, and artwork discussed in school. One female participant recalled and drew a colorful African mask that was used as an example of traditional African art in her art class in school. This transfer of knowledge from one distinct learning environment to another was facilitated by the heuristic and decentralized mode of instruction in the program.

Decentralization of decision making about programming activities and processes at the center, as observed in the cleaning and pavement-adornment projects, encouraged self-motivated and inventive learning among participants. The role of their instructors was to coordinate COTF undertakings at the center and to provide expert advice during programming activities. In short, the instructors were more like partners in the learning process as opposed to being authoritative experts as commonly seen in the role of teachers in traditional classrooms.

As part of their exposure to cultural practices in the Poindexter community, participants in the Sawyer art program took part in the 1997 annual Juneteenth African-American Heritage Parade. Juneteenth is celebrated in commemoration of the first Black Holiday of Freedom observed in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865. This significant date in the history of African Americans marks President Lincoln's proclamation to end slavery in the United States. Although slavery was officially banned on January 1, 1865, it was not until 6 months later that African Americans in bondage were notified of their freedom in Texas (Hughes & Meltzer, 1990). In preparation for participation in the 1997 Juneteenth Parade, COTF participants produced musical instruments such as drums made with trimmed cans and plastic tapes, and flutes crafted out of transparent plastic tubes. They also designed banners with four 6 × 3-foot strips of white linen that was provided by GCAC. The

process of designing the banners included group discussion, drawing, and integration of ideas. In starting the project, the instructors conducted a group discussion in which participants were told the history of the Juneteenth festival. They were also informed about apartheid in South Africa as another example of racial segregation in human history. The 18 participants in the design project were all African Americans. The participants sketched their ideas for a banner on paper, and the drawings were reviewed collectively and grouped into four sections according to how well the contents may be integrated to produce four 6 × 3-foot banners. The finished banners were made with acrylic paints and entailed various symbols such as the map of Africa, and colors that represented “black struggle” and “freedom” against apartheid in South Africa, which are black, red, and green, as depicted in the flag of the African National Congress (ANC). One of the banners bore “Peace, Unity, and Love,” and another read “Happy Juneteenth. We Love America.”

Seventeen participants in the art program joined the Juneteenth Parade that marched from a historical location, known as Blackberry Patch, in Poindexter Village to an open field in front of Sawyer Recreation Center. During the parade, the youth participants beat their drums, played their flutes, and displayed their banners. According to one of the program instructors, the purpose of producing musical instruments and banners for the parade was to enable participants to use artwork produced in the program in real-life contexts. This objective is consistent with the promotion of tacit learning in the program.

In another cultural activity, participants in the Sawyer art program attended Poindexter African American Comin’ Home Festival in summer of 2000. The gathering consisted of a racially and ethnically diverse audience, and symbolized an inflection of the historical struggle of African Americans with issues of heritage, homeland, citizenship, and diaspora status. The festival provided attendees with an opportunity to relate their individual and collective social and cultural experiences. The ceremony took place in the open field in front of Sawyer Recreation Center. In preparation for the event, the center’s management decorated the reception area of the facility with photographs of Poindexter community activists and civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and Ralph Abernathy. On the significance of showing the photographs, a Sawyer staff member explained that African American children should be exposed to their history and cultural heritage so that they may preserve it for posterity. As part of their preparation for the festival, participants in the art program displayed their artwork in the hallways of the center and, with colorful ribbons, adorned the fence that separates the building from the venue of the festival.

At the festival, the Sawyer art program participants interacted with other residents of Poindexter Village and the immediate area at the open-space musical concert organized for the event. At the end of the festival, the youth participants

shared their opinions about the ceremony with one another and their instructors and produced narrative drawings of their experiences at the event. The ceremony participants were unanimous in their opinion that attending the festival enhanced their knowledge of African American cultural heritage.

Early in its inception, COTF at Sawyer became widely known for its outstanding contributions to the artistic and cultural development of youth living in the Poindexter area. As a result, instructors in the program were often invited to display participants' art in public spaces within the community. For example, in March 1997, the program was invited to display participants' work in the Columbus Museum of Art. Work exhibited included decorative ceramic tiles, narrative drawings, and paintings of community scenes. Photographs of historical landmarks such as old church buildings, schools, and the Neighborhood House, taken with disposable cameras, were also displayed. Later that year, the program received an invitation to display participants' artwork at the annual Greater Columbus Art Festival, organized by GCAC. The exposure and complements that participants received by showing their artwork in prestigious venues increased their self-esteem and confidence in exploring new creative ideas, as observed in their frequent references to the art exhibitions that they participated in.

Several distinguished members of the Poindexter community, including elected officials, community activists, academicians, artists, and law enforcement officers, have been invited to the art program on various occasions to address participants on issues of education, accountability, and personal responsibility. In addition, the guests informed participants about the cultural history of the Poindexter community and the virtue of sustaining established community values and cultural practices. Among the prominent members of the community who have visited the art program are Anna Bishop (historian, community activist, and author), Shirley Bowen (artist and community activist), Tom Anderson (arts administrator), and Aminah Robinson (artist, MacArthur Fellow, poet, historian, and community activist). On Aminah Robinson's activism at the Sawyer Center, Ron Williams (1997), recollected that "Aminah showed the children her work, she taught them how she did it, and she told them why it is important to her and the Poindexter community" (personal interview). Along the same line of thought, Columbus Museum of Art curator, Annegreth Nill (2002), reflected on the essence of Robinson's artwork:

Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson is on a remarkable journey that began during her childhood days in Poindexter Village. . . . [T]he stories of its residents made Poindexter Village a magical place full of traditions, legends, and history. Poindexter Village . . . was the crucible and epicenter of inspiration for Robinson's art and the source of the profound sense of community and history she embodies in her work. . . . What began as a project dedicated to make visible the invis-

ible and ignored African American community of her childhood has become a passion for invoking that community to inspire others to search for their histories, traditions, and spirituality. (pp. 27–28)

Through her artwork and social activism, Aminah Robinson, among others, has contributed to the propagation of culturally enriched art within the Poindexter community, as experienced by participants in the Sawyer art program. The participants produced art with contents that were often informed by their experiences in cultural activities in the community as just discussed.

### Closing of the COTF Program and the Sawyer Recreation Center

Generating operating funds is a constant challenge for community art programs across the United States (Cherbo & Wyszomirski, 2008). COTF lost its Ameri-corps funding in 2003 and, as a result, discontinued its programming at Sawyer and the other 10 COFA centers in 2004. To continue its services, COTF started a new partnership with the Columbus Public Schools in 2004. In this partnership, five art instructors from COTF collaborate with nine elementary and middle schools in 21st Century Community Learning Centers within the Columbus Public Schools District during after-school hours. An average of 35 participants attend each of the programs from Monday through Friday on a year-round basis, except on public holidays. After the departure of COTF from Sawyer brought structured art programming at the center to an end, the Sawyer Recreation Center continued to find innovative ways to provide youth in Poindexter Village with art instruction. Local artists were invited to the center to conduct art workshops about twice a month, and youths visiting the center were encouraged to work independently on art projects under the supervision of regular staff members. In May 2009, the Sawyer Recreation Center closed as a casualty of city budget cuts but is now one of about five Columbus recreation centers that might reopen with community support (Williams, 2009).

### Implications

As a result of successful programming activities in all its centers, COTF received the American Canvas Model Project Recognition Award from the National Endowment for the Arts in June 1996. Although COTF has stopped providing art instruction at Sawyer, the remarkable programming at the center may serve as a model of how to conduct meaningful and beneficial community-based learning in art and culture. I offer some additional thoughts in closing. On the importance of relating classroom instruction to students' real-life experiences, Ballengee-Morris

and Taylor (2005) observe, “Students come into the classroom with knowledge, experiences, and perceptions that enrich the development of curriculum. . . . Sociocultural issues, questions, problems, concepts, or topics could begin at the students’ personal cultural identity level” (p. 13). The accomplishments of COTF at Sawyer should serve as motivation for public school art teachers to visit and similar programs located within their communities. Exposure to student behaviors, interests, and artistic and intellectual aptitudes within a nonschool, community-based learning environment would enable teachers to learn differently about their students. Finally, minority students in the public schools—students whose cultures are either excluded or barely represented in the typical school art curriculum (Davis, 1994)—may benefit from a school art program modeled in part after COTF at Sawyer.

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