

From Constructivism to Contemplative Art Journaling: A Case Study of a Course Evolution

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of the added value that art journaling has for preservice teachers. Art journaling is a contemplative-pedagogical strategy we used while teaching “Assimilating Arts into Teaching,” an introductory course in an undergraduate program that trains preservice teachers. In this case study we describe the course’s initial constructivist teaching ideology and its merits and limitations, then present contemplative theory and practices, with an emphasis on art journaling as the contemplative method we chose to use in this course. We present selected art journals created by our students, analyze them, and convey students’ evaluations of this teaching method. Finally, we discuss advantages of art journaling as a teaching method for training preservice teachers.

Keywords

Contemplative learning; Art journaling;
Preservice teacher education

1. Introduction

Academic courses in teaching and education programs aim to offer either professional, content-specific skills or methodological and pedagogical skills to budding teachers and educators. Only a few programs and courses provide opportunities for self-exploration and personal growth. This paper describes the process of restructuring “Assimilating Arts into Teaching,” an introductory course in an undergraduate program that trains preservice teachers with an emphasis on personal growth through the arts. This theoretical course deals with the use of arts in the educational context. In the course, students read theoretical papers on creativity (e.g., De Bono, 1985), playfulness (e.g., Winnicott, 1971), primary processes (e.g., Noy & Noy-Sharav, 2013), and art as a means of self-exploration (e.g., Storr, 1993).

The initial pedagogical approach to the course was constructivist and based on cognitive flexibility theory (Spiro & Jehng, 1990), where each topic was preceded by a rich case (see Table 1). According to the theory, in order to grasp difficult theoretical concepts, one should “revisit” them across diverse cases or contexts of application. In undergoing this process of “crisscrossing” a domain of concepts and cases, learners are invited to transform their initial, typically rigid understanding to one that is more flexible and modular. In other words, the major pedagogical purpose of cognitive flexibility theory is to encourage novice learners to exceed initial phases of conceptual understanding and to discover links between concepts. The course was relatively successful, and the students showed reasonable understanding of the target concepts.

Nevertheless, students still had difficulties understanding the articles, and even though most could grasp enough to do well on the exam, we felt that the theories stayed “out there.” We wanted to extend this “cold,” cognitive approach to one having a stronger impact on the students’ lives, career choices, and appreciation of the role that art can play in teaching. We thus sought a more experiential, emotional, and contemplative experience (Barbezat & Bush, 2013). In what follows, we review the literature on contemplative pedagogy and practices, personal blogs, and art journaling.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Contemplative pedagogy and professional identity

Preservice students’ professional identities are in the process of emerging, and the choice of a career as an educator might be rather tentative for many of them. Harry Lewis (2007), a former dean of Harvard College, stated:

Universities have forgotten their larger educational role for college students. . . . they have forgotten that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to . . . help [students] to grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and leave college as better human beings. (p. xiv)

In line with Lewis’s call, we thought it appropriate to help our students become more mindful about their beliefs, desires, dreams, and internal representations of themselves.

2.2. Contemplative reading and writing

Barbezat and Bush (2013) stated that “reading in college today is more often a race to finish a text than a search for hidden meaning” (p. 112). They described cases of college teachers who were inspired by traditional contemplative religious reading practices (*Lectio Divina*, in the case of the Christian tradition) and who underwent a reading process in their classes that involved various reading iterations from a preliminary literal stage of

Table 1

Illustration of a case-based syllabus: Crisscrossing the landscape of concepts and cases.

Concepts	Cases	Play therapy (Winnicott, 1968/1989, 1971)	Art, artists, and identity formation (Storr, 1993)	Art and primary/secondary communication (Noy & Noy-Sharav, 2013)	Psychoanalytic approaches
<i>Letter to My Father</i> (Kafka, 1919)	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Dreams</i> (Kurosawa, 1990)		✓	✓	✓	
<i>Grimm's Fairytales</i>		✓	✓	✓	
<i>Harold and the Purple Crayon</i> (Johnson, 1955)		✓	✓	✓	
Extracts from therapeutic sessions (Peroni, 2013)			✓	✓	
<i>Like Stars on Earth</i> (Khan & Guple, 2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. According to cognitive flexibility theory (Spiro & Jehng, 1990), using a concept many times across different cases, and analyzing cases from multiple theoretical perspectives, enhances understanding of difficult concepts. The larger bold ✓ indicates a major theoretical perspective related to a case.

understanding of the text to a deeper level of elaboration and extraction of meaning, and finally to stages aiming at achieving personal, moral, and spiritual insights.

Furthermore, Barbezat and Bush (2013) suggested that contemplative journal writing can encourage students to generate their own fresh ideas rather than limit themselves to the academic analysis of other people's texts. It helps them explore their emotional, intuitive, and sensorial responses to course material. Many teachers introduce mindfulness meditation practice before, during, and after periods of writing or reading to encourage their students to write mindfully and to "discover direct, honest language, without self-conscious cleverness or display of ego, a language that yearns to reveal, to lay bare the truth of the student's insight and the details of his or her unique story" (Barbezat & Bush, 2013, p. 132).

2.3. *Personal blogs*

In recent years, personal blogs have been widely used in higher education to promote reflective thinking (e.g., Rennie & Morrison, 2013). Blogs can facilitate student-centered learning, support the development of academic literacies, and foster collaborations (Wankel & Blessinger, 2012). Educational blogs can be seen as an extension of academic journaling: whereas journals are personal documents (typically read only by instructors), part of the thrill of publishing a blog is its public nature (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2012). For many students, presenting their artifacts publicly is a motivational boost (e.g., Radinsky et al., 2001).

In addition to promoting reflection, when properly planned, blogs can be an excellent medium for the social construction of knowledge. The discursive, commentary nature of blogging enables students to generate a support network and create the type of meaning that results from intensive social negotiation. When instructors create high engagement in these blogging activities, a course can become a kind of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) with shared interests and a high level of commitment (Reeves & Gomm, 2012).

2.4. *Art journals and contemplative art*

In a visual journal, individuals record their experiences using both imagery and written text. As mentioned above, numerous studies have shown that educational journals and blogs promote critical reflection. However, few studies address the potential of visual journaling to facilitate reflection (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009). Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) described a case study where art journals were used during art therapy and counseling students' internships. The visual journal facilitated the process of reflection, and the participants considered the combination of artmaking and responsive writing to be a particularly effective aspect of their experience.

It is likely that the visual representations that emerge from feelings and implicit mental states enable the expression of "stuff" that does not lend itself to full verbal articulation (e.g., Noy & Noy-Sharav, 2013). The reflective written text adds post-hoc explicit articulation to these inner states. This process may support students' professional growth (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008).

Contemplative art takes art journaling a step further. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (2016) described the creative "branch" (and, within it, contemplative art) as one of the major contemplative practices currently in use in secular organizational and academic settings (besides branches such as stillness, movement, and rituals). The Center stressed that the purpose of contemplative art is to observe the mind while engaging in the creative process. Thus, the process of making artwork overrides the product itself. For instance, people are encouraged to maintain an awareness not just of what they are making and the process of creating it but also how they are feeling and the way the mind jumps from one topic to another.

In summary, we decided to add art journaling to the existing constructivist pedagogy to support our preservice teachers' reading of theoretical papers, to create a more personal and intimate encounter between them and concepts that relate to teaching through arts, and to give them experiences that would enable them to develop an authentic sense of their professional "mission" in life.

3. Study Design

3.1. Goal of current study

This study's goal was to examine the impact of art journaling on students' emotional and intellectual understanding of theoretical articles and on their ability to appreciate and integrate experiences and insights from theoretical papers into their professional development.

From those goals stem several research questions:

- How would preservice teachers respond to the request to create art journals while reading theoretical texts?
- Would they be open to sharing their journals with classmates?
- What kinds of art journals would emerge from this assignment?
- What would be preservice teachers' evaluations of the extent to which creative art journals ; enhanced their understanding of a theoretical paper?
- How would preservice teachers view the potential contributions of art journals to their professional and personal development?
- How would we, the instructors, view the relevance and effectiveness of this method in comparison with the initial teaching ideology?

3.2. Method

In this work we chose the qualitative research approach, which seems most suitable for this exploratory project that evolved as a result of "reflection in action" (Schön, 1987) of the instructors teaching the course. Qualitative research is considered particularly appropriate for data collected in naturalistic settings, where the researchers are active members of the system they study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

3.3. Context and participants

This study was conducted at a college in northern Israel, in an undergraduate program in education. The two-credit, one-semester course studied is an introductory mandatory course for preservice teachers who choose to major in education through the arts. Each semester, about 60 students enroll in the course. As art journaling was an ongoing method of teaching and assessing students' advancement, all students in the year in which this change occurred participated in the field study (120 students all together). Art journals for this paper were chosen (with students' consent) from journals submitted that year.

3.4. Analyzing students' artifacts

We applied in our study the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) described by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). The IPA focuses on how people perceive and talk about objects and events rather than on the description of phenomena according to a predetermined categorical system of conceptual and scientific criteria. This involves "bracketing" one's preconceptions and allowing phenomena to speak for themselves (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8).

Another central attribute of IPA is that the analytical process is described in terms of a double hermeneutic or dual interpretation process because, first, the participants make meaning of their world and, second, the researcher tries to decode that meaning to make sense of the participants' meaning making (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA researchers try to understand experiences (objects or events; in our case, an artistic experience and its products) from the participant's perspective. At the same time, they try to formulate critical questions referring to the material. In our analysis of the journals themselves and the students' experiences working with this method, we attempt to bring together several perspectives or meanings: that of the student, that of his or her fellow students who react to the journal, and our own. Each perspective is important and valid, and their integration is meant to provide a rich and interesting picture.

4. Results

In this section we describe the process of art journaling in our course. We first convey students' verbal reactions to the assignment, then we share various art journals created by students, analyze them, and end with some students' verbal evaluations of this approach.

4.1. *Introducing the method in class*

In the first lesson, we emphasized the importance of contemplation and explained why we see art as a good way to make education more contemplative for preservice teachers and their future pupils.

When we presented the art journal assignment, some students expressed doubts about their own abilities: "What if I cannot draw, what if I don't have creative ideas?" We encouraged them to suspend their self-judgment and skepticism. We also emphasized the importance of the process rather than the product. After all, this would be the very same attitude appropriate for them to adapt when doing artwork with their future students.

4.2. *Exploring varieties of art journals*

The first time we used journals, we asked students to react to the texts through art alone. We obtained interesting images, but it was never clear whether students had read a paper thoroughly or only up to the point at which an artistic idea had occurred to them. And even if they did read the whole text, we felt that the artistic process was not necessarily in a real dialogue with the theoretical concepts. We therefore changed the instructions and told the class to read the paper and to summarize its main themes, and only then to react to these themes artistically.

In one of the lessons, students read De Bono's (1985) theory of modes of thinking, which are represented as six different colored hats (pessimistic, optimistic, analytic, emotional-intuitive, creative, and managing-monitoring).

The art journal in Fig. 1 illustrates the reflective dialogue between the student's personal values and convictions and De Bono's (1985) text. The challenge of "encapsulating" theoretical ideas in a visual representation encouraged her to come up with meaningful insights and present them in a communicative manner.

De Bono's (1985) text encouraged another student (Fig. 2) to reflect on her personal process of spiritual development. As she transitioned from thinking about the text to creating an artwork, she underwent a short conceptual but also emotional and passionate journey. In this endeavor she seemed to be searching for a new balance within herself.

These examples demonstrate how art journaling can connect the inner worlds of students with "external" knowledge in meaningful ways. We believe that the triangular link between theoretical texts, artworks, and reflective writing indeed encourages contemplative processes. Fig. 3 presents a journal on a chapter by Winnicott (1971).

Winnicott's (1971) book is all about playfulness as a crucial way of being in general as well as a way of being in relationships. Here the student used concrete mirrors in a playful manner, to get both intellectual and personal insights into Winnicott's abstract concepts. In a similar way, the same student reacted to Anthony Storr's (1993) chapter (Fig. 4).

Fig. 1. Example 1 of an art journal

I believe thinking is the heart of our existence. Thinking encompasses our self-awareness, values, and aspirations, which enable us to build our own inner worlds as well as advance our society. Group processes may become destructive when judgment and defensiveness get in the way. De Bono created an optimistic model in which six different and complementary thinking styles can be seen as the roots that provide nutrition to a tree. I chose to make the green hat its heart. Without the creativity of persons and groups, we would have never been able to achieve technological, scientific and spiritual developments. Our planet is, therefore, at the top, and people around it should continue to cooperate and think together in order to advance humankind.

Fig. 1. Example 1 of an art journal.



Fig. 2. . Example 2 of an art journal

I am reading, and re-reading. The red hat, the green hat, the white and the black. What a wonderful paper. I needed to really concentrate to understand, and when that happened, it was quite amazing. While reading I was yearning to hold the red hat, to make it mine. I usually wear the white, neutral-analytic, hat. I guess it is in my nature. The many seeds of the pomegranate symbolize the feelings and sensations through which a person gets to know oneself. I placed the pomegranate in the third chakra, slightly above the solar plexus. This is a center of power from which we get in touch with other people and with the physical world. It was important for me to emphasize this contrast. The red is strong and vivid, but the mind is white and above it all



Fig. 3. . Example 3 of an art journal

When there is no one there to reflect us to ourselves, we cannot observe our own self. When we cannot look at ourselves, we feel meaningless and worthless, like the patient Winnicott described. When I took the photo of the folded mirror-case, I could see each mirror on each side, many shapes, a rich content. Each mirror reflected the other and was also reflected in it. This process does not take place in the picture at the left, where the mirrors do not interact with one another. We all carry parts of the other in ourselves. Our meaning cannot be created solely from our own self.

**Fig. 4.** . Example 4 of an art journal

The creative process is a search for self-identity. Being abstract, we cannot observe our identity directly. Reading Anthony Storr's article made me think about matter and spirit, about matter as a tool to enter and discover spirit. Water always felt to me like a bridge connecting the two worlds. We can see and feel water, but cannot hold it, and nevertheless we ourselves are made of water. When water evaporates we cannot see or feel it. Like water, art is dynamic and thus enables us to feel our identity. Creating art is like turning water, which we cannot hold, into ice. Art can hold a piece of our identity and is thus a meaningful tool for observing our identity.



These journals demonstrate that the art-journaling process can help students read thoroughly and ask reflective questions both intellectually and emotionally. Nevertheless, we sensed that in the process of first reading and verbally conceptualizing and only then creating the artwork, part of the essence of the contemplative process was lost. An art-therapist colleague suggested that we ask students to create while reading. We then instructed the students to begin reading and, when they got to an interesting or difficult point in the paper, to begin drawing or sculpting, thus going back and forth between the article and the art. We also taught them Winnicott's (1968/1989) squiggle game and practiced it in class. We encouraged them to begin drawing with their eyes shut, with no intention or judgment, and to only open their eyes later on and continue from that point. The idea was to help them enter a contemplative, meditative state that would promote an emphasis on the process rather than the product. Fig. 5 is an example of such an art piece.

Fig. 5. . Example 5 of an art journal

I began creating the piece as a squiggle game, by drawing on the other side of a previous draft, and then added candles drippings. I soon discovered that when the wax lands on the paper, the letters printed on the other side of the paper are exposed. For me this seems parallel to Gershuni's description of a child who becomes familiar with his hidden inner world through art, play and storytelling.



The students had a variety of reactions to the process of creating while reading. Some felt that it helped them understand the article, whereas others said they "lost track" of the message. As the course unfolded, and as the students became familiar with different techniques, we encouraged them to create their journal using whatever technique they preferred.

Over the course of one semester, each student created five different art journals, all related to articles from the syllabus. In the final art journal, students were asked to review previous journals and to create an artwork that summarized their experience. They were also asked to write a structured description of the project.

Fig. 6. . Example 6 of an art journal

Name: Daring decisions towards self-fulfillment

Materials: white paper, pencil, triangular carton, pinecone, cotton, dried flowers, eyes.

Process: when reviewing my journals, I thought about my needs, goals and obstacles. I drew a person who is trying to reach a mountain top but since he is carrying a bag full of difficult emotions, he gets stuck. When I tried to sculpt the same image, the artwork fell apart, and I somehow ended up with the sheep playing a flute.



In the journal shown in Fig. 6, the student tried to express the obstacles she encountered in her personal and professional development toward self-fulfillment. In the creative process, the struggle became real, and a vibrant image only arose from playing with crafting materials (cardboard, pinecone, cotton) when she let her creativity wander in different directions.

In this section, thus, we presented six different journals. Each journal is certainly unique. Some are more intellectual and ideological, others more emotional in nature. Some journals focus mainly on the artistic process that was stimulated by the text while others go back and forth from the text to the art, emphasizing the reciprocal influence.

It seems, though, that in all of these artifacts and the texts accompanying them, the attempt to relate to a theoretical paper through art encouraged the students to pursue a personal quest for meaning. Reading and viewing our students' journals, we felt that the pedagogy we implemented did help them in reading and bringing those theoretical concepts closer to their lives.

4.3. *Sharing the art journals*

As part of the task, students were required to upload their journals to the class website and reflect on their peers' journals. In one reaction to an art journal, a student wrote:

Your journal helped me figure out Storr's ideas better. I realized how central the identity construction process is and I enjoyed the way you illustrated the journey each person goes through. I usually feel that I should create something multi-dimensional and very esthetic, but this actually is not the idea. Art aims at crystalizing thoughts and feelings and making them tangible.

This writer was emotionally moved by her peer's art and identified a new way of relating to her own creativity.

Presenting journals on screen in class contributed considerably to the discourse on theoretical concepts.

We were delighted to find ourselves interacting with students who had not only read the papers ahead of time but had also thought about them. We were able to converse at higher levels and convey more personally based knowledge.

4.4. *Students' evaluations of the process*

In their feedback (see Table 2), students emphasized the influence of art journaling on their comprehension and recall of theoretical concepts. They felt that processing the reading materials before class encouraged them to participate in class discussions and that the atmosphere in class was positive and accepting. With regard to their possible future teaching, many of them said they would use similar methods with their pupils to enhance understanding, enjoyment, and interpersonal relationships.

Table 2

Examples of students' written evaluations of the course.

How did the art journals influence your understanding of the articles?

"Thinking deeply about how to present the messages creatively, I understood them much better. I felt I was creating a special learning experience for myself."

"When working on the final project I was surprised to see that looking at my previous artworks reminded me so much of the articles. Journals are efficient for internalizing and remembering materials."

In your view, did the art journal assignments have impact on class discussions?

"I came to the lessons with knowledge and insights and was better able to express myself."

"I looked forward to seeing other students' creations. Our artworks were personal and the class accepted them with love and without judgment."

Would the art journaling experience influence your future teaching?

"The experience strengthened my belief that knowledge is better assimilated when it goes through many senses. I am sure I will integrate arts into my future teaching."

"When I will need to learn new ideas in order to teach them to my students, the best way would be to think deeply and draw something that reflects the subject non-verbally."

"I will use this method in my teaching since it is dynamic, creative and challenging. I believe that using journals with my students will also strengthen the relationship between us."

5. Discussion

In line with previous research on verbal journals, the art journals presented and discussed in this study motivated students to read, and helped them think the articles through and connect the concepts to their own life experiences (Barbezat & Bush, 2013). The art pieces exemplars presented here suggest that when students are invited to explore their personal experiences and emotions as they relate to concepts that are demanding and at times difficult to understand, they are happy to do so. More so, such a process might result in engaging artifacts, which has the potential to encourage a rich social discourse in class and to facilitate the process of an interesting and diverse negotiation of meaning. We strongly believe that such processes meaningfully contribute to the professional development of preservice teachers.

This project helped us realize that art journaling is indeed an important process for preservice teachers in search of their personal and professional identities. A prospective teacher who contemplates these issues with an open heart and a clear mind can contribute enormously to education.

In class discussions, the variety of reactions to each paper helped the class as a whole to better understand the concepts. Students know that, generally speaking, there are no right or wrong reactions to theoretical concepts. Nevertheless, they tend, like the rest of us, to assume that their views are truer than other perspectives. Since artistic reactions are so diverse, idiosyncratic, and powerfully personal, the legitimacy of personal and subjective meaning becomes very apparent, thus encouraging mutual exploration rather than debate. The students did not mention pitfalls in their feedback. We, as instructors, experienced mainly two difficulties when implementing the method.

First, art journals can be very personal and intimate. A few students asked to share their journals with the instructor alone. Since this was an obligatory educational course, rather than a voluntary art course, we accepted private submissions.

Second, some students feel overwhelmed by the requirement to explore their relationships with art and creativity; they may become confused and need help from the instructor or another advisor.

Art journals can, in our view, contribute to learning processes in almost all subjects, not only the humanities.

Art journals can be adapted to students and pupils of all ages, to people with learning disabilities, and to minorities or immigrants who have difficulties with written-language-based assignments. These students would benefit greatly from an opportunity to present nonverbal products.

In this paper we mentioned a few different sets of instructions. Other educators who wish to assign art journals may of course use other instructions and see what works best for them. We believe that it is useful to change instructions at times and to make this search a part of the process.

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