Give and Take, Reflect and Connect

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Abstract

This article offers a reflection on The Big Idea Book Exchange, project-based learning inclusive of co-constructed bookmaking as a form of dialogic exchange between preservice art educators and middle school students. The learning encounters center on a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010) as a social discipline, where reciprocity and accountability among learning colleagues further meaning-making and reshaping of identities. Socio-constructivism is employed within the bookmaking practices through the use of enduring (big) ideas as complex universal constructs (Stewart & Walker, 2006; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011) that require each participant to uncover, unpack, and exchange their personal connections in relation to big ideas and each other’s multiplicity of views.

The Big Idea Book Exchange

The Big Idea Book, a collaborative of Kutztown University preservice art educators and Kutztown Area School District middle school students.

Photograph Credit: Carrie Nordlund.

The Big Idea Book Exchange was a leap of faith for all of us. When we embarked on our project-based learning between preservice art educators and middle school students, participants felt vulnerable in the uncertainty, as well as excited about the possibilities ahead. The facilitators of the project, a higher education educator and a middle school art educator, carefully designed the bookmaking project with give-and-take learning encounters inclusive of processes for extended inquiry and reflective practice. The project was designed to be problem-based, affording application of 21st-century skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. Participant flexibility was fostered through the project’s emergent curriculum design emphasizing student voice and choice. The learning exchanges required participants to be co-constructors, sometimes playing the role of the giver and other times of the receiver. We all had to trust each other to take a leap into the exchange.

“I am most nervous about the back-and-forth aspect of the project. We are putting our trust in other people to complete and expand the book or big idea, and at the same time, have no idea what it will look like when we get it back” (personal reflection, preservice teacher, October 2, 2019).

“I am comfortable in giving my work to others. Part of the excitement of this collaboration has to do with the uncertainty. I find it interesting that each of the participant interpretations will be a bit of a mystery until the end” (personal reflection, preservice teacher, October 2, 2019).

Overview of the Exchange

Art communicates enduring ideas for viewers to ponder (Stewart & Walker, 2006). Enduring ideas, or big ideas, are universal concepts that concern humanity over time and engage inquiry through big questions about life (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Our perceptions, beliefs, and relationships to big ideas are personal, diverse, and unique. By unpacking and creating relationships with big ideas, we connect to our social reality, our lens on the world influenced by corresponding lived experiences.

The Big Idea Book, an exchange of identity.

PHOTOGRAPH CREDIT: CARRIE NORDLUND.
A Big Idea Book* offers an investigation of a learner-centered, socially relevant big idea. During implementation of the Big Idea Book Exchange over an academic semester, back-and-forth inquiry of big ideas was facilitated by way of Big Idea Books. The exchange of inquiry began with preservice art educators charged with the task of prompting and captivating their partner middle school students with a complex big idea. The preservice educators spurred investigations and analysis of a big idea relevant to their middle school partners by constructing an original book form that included: (1) an exterior that introduces or exposes an enduring (big) idea and (2) an interior with a minimum of five empty spaces/pages that afford places for meaning-making about the big idea. Empty spaces, to be explored through text and image, were designed as sites for expressive commentaries about the big idea. The Big Idea Book Exchange was a dialogic act of co-construction between higher education learners (preservice art educators) and middle school learners. The exchanges ensued over two months with co-constructed books traveling between the higher education makers and middle school makers.

Exchange 1

Each preservice educator designed an active learning encounter to meet with and introduce themselves to their respective middle school partner. This first encounter, implemented on-site at the middle school, was aimed at discovering the respective partner’s dispositions and characteristics. Although each preservice educator designed their own curriculum strategy for the meet-and-greet, both parties acted as givers and receivers during the exchange.

Exchange 2

Off-site, each preservice educator reflected on Exchange 1 to consider their middle school partner’s dispositions and asked: What socially-relevant big idea might engage and expand my adolescent partner? Then, each educator created a book structure with an exterior design prompting a big idea and one completed interior space/page expressing their perspective of this big idea. Carefully designed spaces in the book invited open-ended inquiry. The book was merely to reveal a big idea so as to prompt the middle school partner to think personally and critically about it. The preservice educators delivered their books to the middle school site and engaged partners with investigations of the big idea. Again, each preservice educator designed their own curricular engagement with the middle school partner. The higher education learners acted as the givers.

Exchange 3

Without their preservice educator partner present, each middle school learner interpreted (read) the big idea-expression in and of their respective book so as to plan their reply commentary. Then, they created their own meaning-making about the big idea in a self-selected space of the book. The book was offered back to their respective higher education partner, upon completion of this studio work. The middle school learners acted as givers.

Exchange 4

The fourth exchange was anticipated as travel to a high school site, yet scheduling limitations did not afford this partner exchange. We adjusted the project. Instead, peers in the higher education class, acting as new additional partners, received and exchanged their books in order to interpret (read) and add a new big idea commentary. Each peer created their own meaning-making about the big idea in another self-selected space of a book. The higher education learners acted as the receivers and givers.


Exchange 5

Each preservice educator received their original book back from a partnering peer so as to interpret (read) all visual and text commentaries about the big idea. Aiming for closure of the big idea investigations, the educators designed a final learning encounter to be shared with their respective middle school partners. In this culminating event at the middle school site, the preservice educator afforded collaborative analysis of the book’s exchanges and expressions with an emphasis on how the middle school partner might visually and conceptually unify all the book’s pages, or big idea expressions. Here, the partners collaborated to create and resolve the book’s commentaries with their final big idea message(s). Both parties acted as givers and receivers.

Resolving and unifying the book’s individual commentaries.
PHOTOGRAPH CREDIT: CARRIE NORDLUND.

Exchange 6

To celebrate and conclude the collaborative bookmaking, all learners exhibited their expressions for a gallery walk. During the gallery walk, partners could freely examine investigations of big ideas within other book forms.

"On Exchange 2, I felt comfortable handing my book over to someone else to take into their own hands because I set up the book specifically knowing other people would write in it. I had blank pages of the book labeled with our students’ names on it and for the Kutztown University students to also make their contribution. By Exchange 6, I thought the fact that I needed to have so much control over the project, that I went as far as to put labels on the pages, shows I really was not comfortable at all...Some might argue that a collaboration involves influence and creative decisions being made by all members of the team in unison, but I believe that the work I left on my first contribution to the book was a form of communication and the way I created pages of the book influenced the choices of other collaborators going forward" (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 11, 2019).

The Big idea Book Gallery Walk.
PHOTOGRAPH CREDIT: ANDREW RUSSELL.

Community of Exchange

The Big Idea Book Exchange centered on community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010), a social discipline where reciprocity and accountability among learning colleagues further meaning-making and reshaping of identities. What does it mean to engage in a community of practice? Community of practice “is a perspective that locates learning, not in the head or outside of it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social being in a social world” (Wenger, 2010, p. 179). Community of practice is a relationship of participation by means of the social and the individual constituting each other (Vygotsky, 1986, 1978; Wenger, 2010). In the case of the Big Idea Book Exchange, socio-constructivism was employed within the bookmaking procedures through multiplicity of expressions and accountability of exchange between learners. Each contributor to the Big Idea Book uncovered and unpacked their own personal connections in relation to the big idea and added to a social voice developing in the book as a whole.

"I am completely awestruck after seeing the book filled with responses...all the similarities they share, yet how they are still clearly representative of different people and ideas” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 6, 2019).

"I was relieved that I was able to create something that could be built upon. It was interesting watching it grow and develop with multiple people. My big idea changed throughout the course of making the book and it became an even more concrete idea” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 13, 2019).

The primary goal of the Big Idea Book Exchange was to foster the notion of symbiotic relationships of
knowledge and identity, while still honoring the learner-center voice of the adolescent. Preservice educators supported this notion by the big ideas they chose for their books: identity over time; identity with the environment; life changes; intersections of identity; self-care; social media and identity; adult vs. adolescent; collective identity; displacement of identity; confidence; and reality vs. fantasy. A community of practice around these themes created common ground, inspired participation, and gave meaning to choices and actions. Ongoing navigation of identity is situated in a community of practice since it is a social learning system alive with complex and emergent relationships and structures (Samaras & Sell 2013; Vygotsky, 1986).

“Our initial topic grew to much more than it once was. We began with ‘identity’ and it became more about the things we do as these identities and the things we do to be alright within them... when I asked him [middle school partner] to elaborate on his self-care routine, he said ‘riding my bike down a quiet empty street with a bunch of leaves on it. I like the noise they make under my tires and the smell they have’” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 6, 2019).

The Big Idea Book Exchange as a curricular strategy not only utilized a community of exchange to ensure give-and-take in the learning process, it also relied on reflective practice to document growth and meaning-making. Preservice educators composed written reflections marking their personal connections during each stage of exchange. From the Big Idea Book Exchange preservice educators noted their symbiotic relationship of identity, between themselves and others in the field, each constituting the other. The processes of the bookmaking, such as give-and-take exchanges and reflect-and-connect, became metaphors for their understanding of what matters to the middle school setting and symbolically gives birth to what matters to the preservice educators — who they are and who they want and need to be.

“The synthesis task we provided for a conclusion of our book was a review, reflect, and connect activity. To unify the book, we reflected on the decisions of each artist and then took symbols from each of the works to make a collaborative piece including all our identities” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 11, 2019).

Reflections from middle school learners also demonstrated a sense of belonging within the spaces of exchange, a timely and critical counter to a cultural climate of us vs. them.

“If I could change the project, I would add even more pages for other people. Then more people can add to it...so we can see each other’s ideas” (personal reflection, middle school learner, November 11, 2019).

“I thought the book was like a biography. It showed OUR identity. The theme was really cool, because you could express yourself how you wanted. But also, it shows similarities in different people” (personal reflection, middle school learner, November 11, 2019).

Future of the Exchange

Reflecting on the outcomes of the Big Idea Book Exchange, we as founders and facilitators of the project considered its method of exchange successful. For both the higher education and middle school learners, the project afforded a shift from seeing educators as the expert provider in the classroom to rather educators as co-constructors of or partners in knowledge.

“I feel my personal teaching philosophy growing from this experience, working alongside of our middle schoolers engaging in the same task simultaneously is something I plan to work into future lessons” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 6, 2019).

A leap of faith into uncertainty allowed a vast space for middle school learners to seize ownership and pride in developing their visual responses. Preservice educators were offered creativity of possibility to independently design learning encounters. In our classroom full of learners, no one child nor one adult learner was engaged in the same experience.

“This exchange illustrates how big ideas stimulate meaning-making...I now see that big ideas can be broad and take a learner in many directions. Change.” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 6, 2019).

“Collaboration in a similar space (a book) can provoke interesting ideas and a way to visually talk to one another. It’s a great tool for inquiry” (personal reflection, preservice educator, November 6, 2019).

Community of Practice.

PHOTOGRAPH CREDIT: ANDREW RUSSELL
Great aesthetic issues emerged in the partnerships, including how do you amalgamate one’s own ideas with the ideas that already exist? How do you allow yourself to experience and accept an aesthetic that may be different than yours? The Big Idea Book Exchange poses the question of authorship. Who owns these expressions, the books?

Each learner, child and adult, was given an opportunity to "reach onto oneself, to unravel subjectivities and values as shaping perception, interpretation, with an openness to these being reshaped in this process" (Bressler, 2006, p. 62). Accountability to others brought ourselves fully and uniquely to the work. The books spurred a back-and-forth community of practice. Could the inquiry continue? Where would the books travel from here? Where does their future belong?

“I do see bookmaking differently now...I feel that people should collaborate more with books” (personal reflection, middle school learner, November 11, 2019).

“I think these books should be given to other students so we can see others’ ideas” (personal reflection, middle school learner, November 11, 2019).

We, the higher educator and middle school educator as founders of this project-based learning have also relished in our community of practice. We found ourselves better educators and better people in the accountability of a partnership. We came to rely on each other in and outside the classroom, professionally and personally. We have modeled for our higher education learners and middle school learners what we want them to take into the world. Learning is a co-constructed social discipline, a partnership. As for the books, their future has not been determined as of yet. Books are conversations. It was very difficult to cease an engaging conversation, one that was always burgeoning. We may need to sustain the conversations by how and where the books travel from here. We may need to engage in another leap of faith.

* The inception of the Big Idea Book began with its founder Dr. Kathy Unrath and her work in the art education program of the University of Missouri. Since 2008, Dr. Carrie Nordlund at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania has made subsequent adaptations and designs of the curriculum strategy with a deep appreciation for its inception and founder.

About the Authors

Carrie Nordlund, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Art Education at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. She earned her Ph.D. in Art Education from the University of Missouri–Columbia, M.A. in Art Education from Central Missouri State University, and B.F.A. from the Kansas City Art Institute. Her research and best practices are published in Visual Inquiry: Learning and Teaching Art; Art Education: The Journal of the National Art Education Association; Visual Arts Research; Activist Art in Social Justice Pedagogy: Engaging Students in Global Issues through the Arts; Translations from Theory to Practice; and SchoolArts.

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References


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