Visualizing Digital Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, forty art, design, and media educators throughout a midwestern state in the United States critically examined their lessons through the lenses of social-emotional learning (SEL), standards-based assessment, research-informed practice, and culturally responsive instruction. During the program, teacher-learners recorded their reflections, which are condensed in a presentation-as-art-installation, highlighting dialogic self-reflection in a community of practice. In the video, originally conceived as a 2-channel installation, teachers discuss SEL; equity, diversity, and inclusion; research-informed practice; and standards-based grading, looking at the camera by themselves and reflecting on their daily practice as they incorporate new learning into their teaching. The text discusses how these transformative conversations took place, the necessary conditions for dialogic self-reflection in a community of practice, their impact on their professional practice, and sharing classroom experiences.

KEYWORDS: Social-Emotional Learning, Equity Diversity and Inclusion, Communities of Practice, Professional Development, Reflective Practitioner

Link to 2-channel installation video
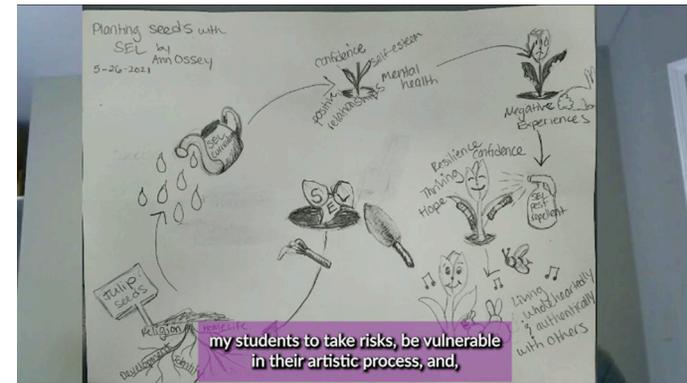
Figure 1. *Screenshot of the video where teacher Ann Ossey explains what SEL looks like in the art classroom.*

Introduction

As the 2020 lockdown affected schools, the Illinois Art Educators Association (IAEA) with the support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council Agency, asked teachers to collaborate in creating lessons grounded on research-based practices. These sessions were named Collaborating for Excellence (CFE). The program consisted of four modules: Incorporating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into the Arts Curriculum; Standard-based Assessment Practices; Research-informed practice; and Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the Art Room. An additional working module encouraged participants to create a new lesson or redesign an old one incorporating the new learning and to share this lesson in an online repository on the IAEA website (ilaea.org).

A research team, with co-author Brad Olson as Principal Investigator, collected the data produced by participants. During the process, participant Verónica Soria-Martínez was invited to the research team to produce a series of visual artifacts using arts-based research methods, which were later presented at state and national conferences with participants, Jennifer Fitzpatrick and Ann Ossey. The result is a video installation with two channels facing each other, as in an actual conversation, representing teachers as they widen the discussion to improve their teaching. The clips used in the video are participants' responses produced during the learning modules, and they primarily focus on contributions for the first module (SEL), although learning from the other modules is intertwined. A side-by-side version of the two-channel installation is presented here in a video format. This paper discusses the theoretical frameworks and the contexts that contributed to the making of the video.

Theoretical Frameworks

To guide this project, we drew upon theoretical frameworks that explore the concept of *communities of practice* (CoP). Wenger-Trayner (2015) describes a community of practice as a group of people engaged in collective learning within a shared domain of human endeavor. A CoP may take a variety of shapes, but is primarily organized around the successful completion of a shared learning task. This might take the form of a group of engineers working to solve similar problems; artists exploring shared issues or media; doctors, scientists, and researchers hoping to understand a particular illness; or in our case, teachers hoping to improve their practice.

Studies of CoPs have been useful in understanding social learning in a wide variety of fields. Some scholars have explored writing retreats composed of academics across disciplines (Wiebe et al., 2023). In marketing, others have studied how "foodie" influencers on social media connect in CoPs (Miguel et al., 2022). Within the field of education in general, studies have investigated how teachers come together in collaborative learning situations in service of professional development (Brown et al., 2021). In the field of art education, CoPs have framed how art teachers may learn among each other and improve their practice as artists and educators. Gates (2010) explains that many art teachers feel like "islands," disconnected in practice from others in their field. Gates studies the tensions between isolation and collaboration regarding art educators' professional development, arguing that learner-directed approaches can connect art teachers. In this process, isolated "islands" of teachers may coalesce into a more connective network or "archipelago" (p. 7).

Within any CoP, Wenger (2000) notes the pedagogical role of *boundary encounters*. Wenger theorizes that certain boundaries are formed in a CoP, mainly through the dimensions of competence and experience. Tensions occur at these boundaries as dominant ideas within the in-group are challenged by new ones from outside perspectives. Wenger argues that "competence and experience tend to diverge: a boundary interaction is usually an experience of being exposed to a foreign competence" (p. 233). In this regard, Wenger refers consistently to learning occurring "at the boundaries" of the group and recognizes that learning "across" them may be more difficult (pp. 232-238). This distinction is illustrated by picturing yourself sitting at a table of particle physicists. You might not learn much simply because "the distance between your own experience and the competence you are confronting is just too great" (p. 233).

When competence and experience are too close, a CoP may risk becoming insular, losing its dynamism, or becoming stale in its practice. Conversely, learning may not likely occur if competency and experience

are too disconnected (Wenger, 2000). However, this encounter with new ideas at the boundary of a CoP is also where misunderstandings and tensions between CoP members may occur. For CFE, one of the organizational goals was to facilitate these connections between art educators of varying competencies and experiences to encourage deeper learning about teaching through this tension.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, Ellsworth (2004) argues that conflict and tension may be crucial to a person's learning experience. Ellsworth has long studied various places where learning occurs, including schools, public memorials, and other community sites. She argues that any site might become pedagogical when they provide a "hinge" (or impetus) for a person to reconsider meanings they may have of "inside and outside, self and other, personal and social" (p. 45). For Ellsworth, the pedagogical hinge relies on conflict and tension between old and new ideas. In certain situations, conflict might lead one to learn when it asks them to "redraw the boundaries of who you think we are and who you think they are" (pp. 95–97).

In the case of the CFE program studied here, teachers from various contexts across our state were allowed to expand their community of practice beyond their local, immediate environments and be challenged by ideas from others outside their usual realms of influence. In CFE, veteran teachers co-mingled with teachers in their first few years of service; painters interfaced with sculptors; rural teachers conversed with urban/suburban teachers, and so on. This diversity of competence and experience led to rich debates regarding topics like social-emotional learning, one of CFEs core modules.

Digital Storytelling (DST) as Research

As an evaluation team, our goal was to measure CFEs efficacy in various ways and employed mixed-methods research models to do so. In other reports of the CFE program, attention was paid to analyzing quantitative and demographic data gleaned from pre- and post-program surveys, engagement within each module, and assessing growth and development in targeted lesson plans selected by participants.

However, several qualitative artifacts and data points were also generated during CFE that we found rich for analysis in new ways. During the CFE program, participants responded reflectively to several prompts in the form of drawings, diagrams, short written discussion posts, and videos posted to the video-based teaching platform Flipgrid. Each of these components together helps to tell the story of the CFE program from the experience and perspectives of the participating art educators.

Due to the rich audio-visual qualities of these types of data and the digital, asynchronous learning space of the CFE program itself, we looked to arts-based research methods to analyze participants' experiences in CFE. We were drawn to models of using digital storytelling as a research method. For Lambert (2009, 2013), *digital storytelling* (DST) was originally defined as a 2–5-minute audio-visual product that combines photographs with voice-over narration to facilitate story sharing. DST has been employed in many different domains, including health research about the COVID-19 pandemic (Durant & Kortes-Miller, 2023; West et al., 2022), as an inquiry tool within the field of education in general (Özkaya, 2022) and in Art Education in particular (Chung, 2007). In contexts like these, DST has been argued to provide counter-narratives, encourage participatory research, provide therapeutic benefits, aid in knowledge translation, develop communities, and provide pathways for professional development (de Jager et al., 2017).

However, most relevant to us was the use of DST as a research tool to analyze and understand the phenomenon at hand. It is suggested that DST as a research tool allows participants to engage in "deep listening," provides more depth than traditional interviews, and encourages greater collaboration between subjects (de Jager et al, 2017, p. 2572). In the process of engaging in video reflections, participants in CFE utilized DST to share their experiences and perspectives on many topics at the center of the program modules and collaborate and create dialogue with others. As researchers, DST helped us understand the CFE program in a more holistic, qualitative way. Although the video responses and other visual data generated by CFE participants may not take the direct form of DST as defined by Lambert, we suggest that their digital, multi-modal responses signify new forms in which DST might take shape. This is particularly useful in providing a picture of the CFE program as a community of practice and in exploring where boundary encounters and tensions on module topics like social-emotional learning occurred. In our review of the video responses generated by participants, we examined transcripts and videos for dialogues across boundaries of geography, experience, and competency, highlighting these conversations in the finished compilation.

Collaborating for Excellence Overview

The sessions started during the spring of 2021, when most teachers were still teaching in a combination of remote, hybrid, or hyflex instruction, with in-person and online students simultaneously. It was a new space for teachers to navigate, regardless of experience. Collaborating online allowed us to reflectively use that in-between space to start rethinking what art education can be and make it a reality in our classrooms.
In the first module, facilitator Jennifer Wargin provided examples of using SEL in the art classroom. It has been previously researched how SEL improves students' mental health and well-being, increasing engagement and establishing the foundations for applying cognition, and how the arts can have an important role in developing SEL (Eddy et al., 2021). Wargin proposed a curriculum that connected the five competencies established by the Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to the four artistic processes encompassed by the National Core Art Standards (create, present, respond, connect). The CASEL competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). The art processes in the studio classroom elicit them regularly. For instance, working on self-expression requires students to develop their self-awareness, which in turn promotes their self-management. Likewise, connecting (ideas and artists with cultures and diverse socioeconomic groups) has an impact on students' social awareness. Students develop their relationship skills when they respond to other artwork, such as during critiques. And lastly, when making choices to present, they exert their responsible decision-making.

Additionally, participants were introduced to how trauma or adverse events may have an impact on learning by temporarily suspending brain function, which has been documented by Hammond (2014). Similarly, attention to self-awareness may improve student agency and help reverse that negative effect, as does maintaining a culturally responsive community for learning where a growth mindset is promoted (Hammond, 2014). For instance, naming feelings has been found to have a regulating effect on the brain (Torre & Lieberman, 2018). Along these lines, participants worked in activities to name feelings to increase awareness of emotions and learned how to unpack this work for students with the goal of promoting self-regulation. Some participants featured in the video had previous experience implementing SEL mini-lessons separated from the art instruction. The difference was that now we were learning to incorporate it into our lessons by prompting students to think about their lives, identities, and relationships and encouraging them to create art about it.

Some voices have critiqued SEL for overlooking the socioeconomic inequalities that students confront. Camangian and Cariaga (2021) argue that its lack of historical analysis is hegemonistic and propose humanization instead. Additionally, participants in the CFE discussed ways to implement SEL components in a "well thought out curriculum without taking away from the art itself" (05:41). However, others have claimed the transformative power of SEL as a lever for equity (Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020). The video includes teacher responses showing ways in which SEL has direct implications in working toward more just communities and how maintaining an equitable, diverse, and inclusive environment results in a place where individuals feel respected, safe, and accounted for.

In the video, teachers' honesty and vulnerability tie SEL with Culturally Responsive Teaching practices. For instance, learning the effects of chronic stress and trauma on the brain and gaining awareness of how cortisol hijacks the brain and prevents it from learning (Hammond, 2014) made a participant reflect on how their cognitive function was blocked growing up and relate to his students in a new way (00:48). Another teacher notes how a growth mindset was encouraged (10:30) by helping students with their self-talk. Teachers put themselves in the place of their students, observing things from their perspective, thus minimizing the power differential.

The video promotes empowerment for art educators by highlighting art class as a space where SEL most naturally happens, as students work on creative self-expression and other studio structures. Several teachers emphasize throughout the video the need for safe environments where students can express themselves, collaborate, and be listened to. Similarly, teachers incorporate SEL competencies into the way they teach by surveying the class climate and collecting student input. This emphasis on implementing democratic processes is evident in (07:15, 08:18, and 12:20) when different teachers explain structures they have in place to allow their students to give them feedback about the class and their teaching.

As a CoP, we modeled such a space for art teachers/learners. One of the teachers proposes that art teachers "can be leaders" (05:06) and can show other teachers how to do this kind of work. Another reflects on how art classes are "a recruiting tool…but at the same time, we're not included in a lot of the decision-making process" (05:53). Teachers saw their existing separation as specialists in their buildings/districts exacerbated by a global pandemic. During this time, this collaboration created equitable opportunities by promoting exchange among teachers from affluent districts and teachers who barely had materials or whose students could not afford them. This exchange sparked recognition of cognitive dissonances and stopped perceiving certain abuses of power as normal.

As part of our study of CFE, pre- and post-intervention surveys yielded some valuable data regarding the efficacy of the program and its impact on participating teachers. Nearly all participants noted some improvement in their targeted lesson plans, and 44% noted a major difference. In written reflections, many described a valuable and positive learning experience facilitated by their encounters with new ideas. One such participant stated:

> (It's) the power and knowledge that can be found when you collaborate with other educators to make yourself a better educator… I have been amazed by the amount of things that I did not know or had not given proper consideration to until hearing other educators share their experiences utilizing the skills and knowledge we have covered.

Other participants have highlighted how the CFE experience provided them with a diverse toolbox of resources to support EDI and SEL in their classrooms to meet the needs of their students. One of them emphasized how the collaborative aspect supported this learning:

> Oftentimes, art teachers are the only ones in their content area in a building or school district. The inability to collaborate with others in the same content area is isolating. CFE bridged that gap and met this need for art teachers across the state of Illinois. It also inspired me to pursue teacher leadership at the national level through Connected Arts Network to promote the same types of connections and bridge gaps for isolated art teachers across the United States. The professional relationships I gained from being a part of CFE continue to be a part of my professional world.

Exposure to new ideas, a range of diverse approaches, and collaboration with other teachers were important themes throughout.

When we shared the video at art educator conferences, we offered an open dialog at the end, which tended to focus on the SEL aspect. Teachers in the audience showed curiosity about how SEL would benefit their practices; however, some expressed concern that this could mean a new burden at the margins of their competencies. However, at a moment where political polarization and a national teen mental health crisis converge (US Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023), adopting SEL may allow teachers to help their students' well-being without being accused of politicization or indoctrination. In this sense, the CoP allowed us to experience SEL, EDI, and other equity-related practices (such as standard-based grading and research-informed teaching) with other colleagues and try them on ourselves in a safe environment before putting them into practice. The role of CFE as a community of practice empowered teachers to cross boundaries of geography, experience, and competence to discuss these challenging issues in our field.

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