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## Creating Collaborative Art

Sarah J. Nott

Western Michigan University, [sarah.j.nott@wmich.edu](mailto:sarah.j.nott@wmich.edu)

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Sarah Nott

“Creating Collaborative Art”

BFA in Art Education Honors Thesis Project

Abstract and Project Description

## **Abstract**

As my thesis for the Lee Honors College, I created and undertook in-class teaching experience in collaboration with theater teacher Robin Nott at Gull Lake High School and third grade teacher Mary VanderWal at Ryan Intermediate School in Richland, Michigan. My thesis project expanded on a previously existing program that pairs high school students from Mr. Nott's Story Caravan program with elementary students to participate in various reading- and storytelling-based activities.

I taught in Mr. Nott's classroom for four fifty-minute sessions at the end of March. During the first session, I worked solely with the high school students, sharing thoughts on how to positively, constructively interact with younger children and emphasizing the importance of their roles as mentors. For the remaining three sessions, the high school and elementary students worked together under my guidance to create works of art. For our first project, each high school student was paired with an elementary student. Then, by collaborating and working off of one another's lines and ideas, each pair of students created a mandala. Mandalas are an ancient spiritual art form intended to aid meditation through the use of vivid colors and radial or concentric pattern. The students learned a 2-D technique called oil pastel resist to complete these images. Finally, working as a class, the students created a large quilt-style installation, again using oil pastel resist and completing one another's images. During the creation of these projects, I emphasized the importance of the cooperative dialogue and interactions that occur when two or more people create art together. When a group of people must come to mutual decisions and work together towards a common creative goal, there is a potential for real, meaningful learning to occur. For this thesis project, the elements of experiential learning and cooperation were more important than the finished artworks themselves.

To conclude this project, I used the professional art installation skills I've learned during my employment at the art galleries in the Richmond Center for Visual Arts to curate and install an exhibition of the completed student artwork. Parents and student artists were invited to attend a reception for this art show, and a final advantage of my project was the validation and encouragement the student artists received upon seeing their artwork formally displayed.

## **Exhibition Rationale**

When I began thinking about creating my thesis project, I realized I had no idea what a typical Art Education thesis might entail. After a great deal of brainstorming, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to lead a lesson for my thesis project, and that I had the connections in the public school system to do it. I even knew that I would be working with a program that paired elementary students with high school students. When I began to try to narrow down my lesson plan, however, it became clear to me that I was struggling to decide what type of art we'd actually be creating. What media should we use? Should we make narrative art? Should it be abstract, or realist? I toiled over lesson plan ideas for hours, but I didn't feel strong connections to any of them. That's when it hit me: I wanted to teach a lesson about the Art of Collaboration. The cooperative dialogue and interactions that occur when two or more people create art together are truly invaluable experiences, no matter the media. When a group of people must come to mutual decisions and work together towards a common creative goal, there is a potential for real, meaningful learning to occur.

Once I had this realization, I was able to let myself simply create a project that would serve as a vessel for the lessons found in a collaborative artistic experience- and if the students learned a new technique or two along the way, so much the better. As I actually taught this lesson, I became even more excited about my decision to focus on its cooperative elements: watching the high school students I worked with compassionately guide and inspire their younger partners and witnessing the elementary students invigorate and teach their mentors was thrilling for me.

I am thankful to my student participants for their energy and creativity, and to everyone who helped make this project possible. I am so appreciative to have been given the opportunity to learn how powerful art can be when created cooperatively, and am truly fortunate have witnessed the Art of Collaboration.

The students at work, with Sarah's help.



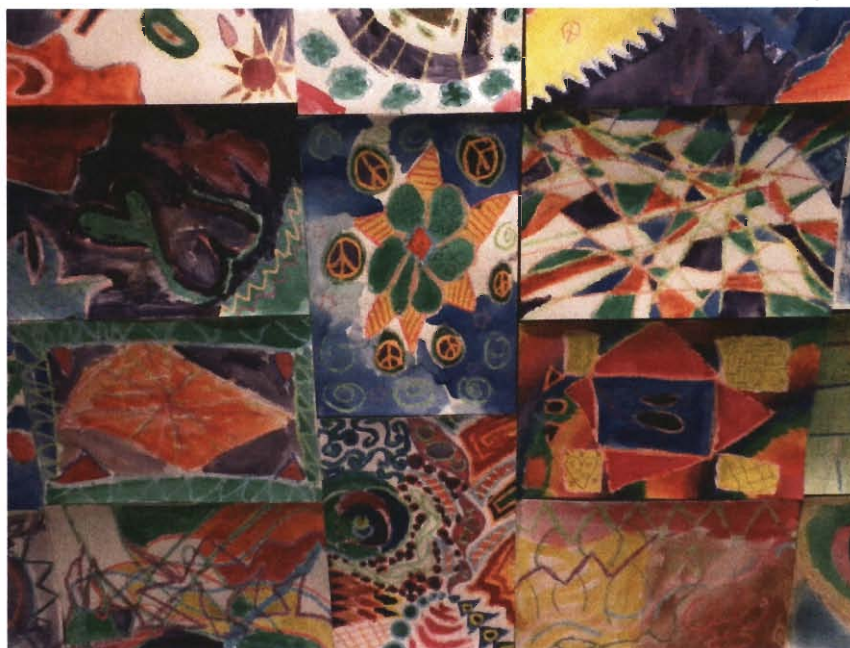




The finished works of art. Top: Mandalas in the gallery, bottom: a finished mandala.



The finished works of art. Top: Quilt installation in the gallery, bottom: quilt close-up.





The final exhibition and reception.



Proud student artists.

