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Making Collages: Not Just “A Nice Art Project”

Of the many skills I take for granted, writing is close to the top of my list. Yes, I sometimes procrastinate, feel frustrated, or get writer’s block when I am required to write papers, but after a few moans, groans, and solitaire games, my writer’s block usually crumbles and I am ready to write. Unfortunately, for the adult literacy learners in my class, writer’s block is often relentless and unyielding. As a writing teacher, I realize that writing stirs much anxiety in the classroom. I have made it a priority of finding new ways to “unblock” my students and make writing less scary for them.

One of the most effective means of demolishing the barriers to writing has been collage. In Deborah Barndt’s article, “Naming, Making, and Connecting – Reclaiming Lost Arts: The Pedagogical Possibilities of Photo-Story Production,” she reminds us that “a visual environment...is part of the ideological landscape that surrounds us and forms us, and within which we work (Barndt, 2001).” Since it is such a familiar environment (for those who are capable of seeing), photographs and drawings are less “threatening.” I have observed my students to not feel as intimidated and anxious while making collages as compared to writing an essay.

Collages serve as an entry point to the process of learning. In my experience as a teacher, they have served as an aid for expressing feelings which learners have had trouble revealing verbally. They have an incredible value as a device for reflection and exploration. For example, one GED essay topic asked the students to discuss the many roles that they play. I invited the women to look through magazines and find pictures that portray their duties and feelings toward the different roles they play for their families, friends, and selves. I remember one woman, in particular, who most often would have trouble putting one sentence on the page. She found a picture of a woman with arms like elastic bands, which were being pulled in several directions by various people. She wrote that the picture described her feelings exactly, “[l]ike rubber bands pulling to their limits and on the verge of snapping.” This speaks so vividly of how the women often feel. They are used as objects and pushed, pulled, and bent until they feel broken. Not only are their bodies attacked, but their spirits are also put down more and more. The vicious cycle of impairment continues as their emotions are affected and later their minds. The collage not only reactivates the writing process, but it also frees the body, lifts the spirit, liberates the emotions, and unblocks the mind.

Collages are also extremely helpful for goal setting as well. In all of the core curriculum classes, goal setting is an important but challenging task. Horsman states “issues of control, connection and meaning are central to literacy learning as they are integrally connected to the tasks of setting goals, increasingly a central aspect of how literacy programming is being organized (2001).” Although goal setting may prove difficult and need special care, it is an essential element for gaining a deeper *sense of self*. By creating a pictorial representation of a *self* that can achieve goals, the women are able to give meaning to what they are working towards in their educational journeys. They see the goal and then connect with it. After creating a goals collage, we encourage the women to put this collage in a special place where they will see it every.

The profound evidence in the benefits of collage making is in the way that it creates a comforting community. Numerous times I have witnessed the women eager to share their collages with the group. It is almost contagious - when one woman

begins to talk about her collage, then many take the initiative to reveal their products, too. They find comfort in shared experiences and welcome those that may be different. Barndt articulates that the “process of imaging and writing our own diverse histories counters any homogenous representation of community and feeds new ways of connecting (2001).” This notion fits perfectly in our continuing effort of creating a safe space for our learners. It helps establish a trusting environment and allows for the development of a *sense of place*.

After discussing the value of collage making in a workshop for adult basic educators, I received a comment on an evaluation form that stated, “nice art project.” Upon hearing this comment, I was saddened that the participant had not fully understood the worth of this tool. It is not just “a nice art project;” it is an opportunity for learning, a community builder, and creative expression. Collage can be used to explore our understanding of an issue, reflect on and what we have learned about an issue or topic, or express our dreams and feelings. For some people these may seem like simple tasks, but for other learners, especially those who have perpetually been put down, oppressed, and victimized, it is not an effortless undertaking. Barndt summarizes my feelings and experiences in using collages as a “process itself that offers the richest moments for transformative learning, and the greatest possibilities for reclaiming the powers to name, to make, and to connect (2001)” I have actually seen collages aid in the transformation of my students. In a final essay, one student wrote, “In the past I really felt that I could not succeed, but now I know I can...and go beyond what I ever dreamed of doing.”

Extract From:

Creating Inner and Outer *Sacred Space*: An Adult Learner Program’s Wholistic Approach To Supporting Low-Income Women Who Have Been Impacted By Violence, pages 45-47