

## Chapter 6. Experiencing wellbeing at La Ruche d'Art: methods and materials of an art hive

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### **Abstract**

Involvement in the creative arts has a sustained and positive impact on mental and social wellbeing. Adding a third space for arts-based social inclusion, community engagement, and service learning for university students, provides a powerful vehicle for civic exchange across diverse demographics. Over time, a community art studio, aka Art Hive, provides a platform for participatory practice research leading to social innovation. This workshop recreated in part, *La Ruche d'Art* (The Art Hive), a university storefront classroom and a public home place for residents in a low wealth neighbourhood in Montreal. A public home place is a protected safe space, both psychologically and physically, which invites community members to share their skills and develop their unique voices. The workshop introduced theories, methods, and materials used in the Art Hive. Attendees assembled small visual journals based on creative reuse principles while sharing stories related to the relevance and scope of these special third spaces. Concordia University's Art Hive launched in 2011 hosts a network of 100 Art Hives across North America and Europe. This workshop encouraged participants to consider developing an Art Hive in their workplace or community

**Keywords:** arts-based social inclusion, public home place, social innovation.

### **Theoretical background**

Citizens are becoming acutely aware that "while the wealthiest human beings on earth are increasingly preoccupied with entertainment and living creative and expressive lives, nearly one billion other human beings are living in poverty and several billion more are barely making ends meet" (Rifkin, 2000, p. 231). Broadening personal wellbeing to include effective responses to urgent global dilemmas such as: consequences of climate

change, aging populations, diminished housing, and scarcity of clean air and water, is necessary. Watkins and Shulman expands Martín-Baró's (1994) suggestion to radically re-visioning psychology by stating, "To transform and humanize repressive or failing human institutions, all of the people who participate in them must also be transformed and humanized through participatory dialogue and creative imagination about alternatives." (2008, p. 27).

Art Hives provide one response to these escalating trends by inviting and empowering citizens to set up small and sustainable neighbourhood spaces located outside the market place. These free public home places welcome isolated seniors, marginalized youth, young families, immigrant newcomers, and other vulnerable individuals living on the margins of communities, and provide lively spaces to re-engage issues that matters to those participating. In Belenky, Bond and Weinstock's words:

*Public home places are places where people support each other's development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the home place. Using the home place as a model, the members go on working to make the whole society more inclusive, nurturing, and responsive to the developmental needs of all people - but most especially of those who have been excluded and silenced. (1997, p.13)*

These complex social spaces "provide the ideological and material conditions necessary to educate a citizenry in the dynamics of critical literacy and civic courage, and these constitute the basis for functioning as active citizens in a democratic society" (Giroux, 1988, p. xxxii).

Liberation psychology provides another important theoretical lens underpinning the Art Hives incorporating principles of Freire's (1989) critical education and Martín-Baró's (1994) liberation theology. Liberation

psychology calls for contextualizing individual psychological suffering within social and cultural experiences of hegemony and oppression (Watkins & Shulman 2008, p. 26). While involvement in the creative arts have been shown to have a positive effect on wellbeing (Bolwerk, Mack-Andrick, Lang, Dörfler, & Maihöfner, 2014), Watkins and Shulman (2008) describe the necessity of the creative arts in social transformation:

*The arts have played a crucial role in assisting communities to resignify and resymbolize their experiences and environments. Cultural activists have been brilliantly inventive in adapting art forms to local conditions to awaken new sensibilities and develop collaborative methodologies that allow people with no arts training to participate. These experiences can be life changing. (p.264)*

Extending the university into the community as a “democratic public sphere” (Giroux, 1988, p. xxxii) has deep roots in Spain. My husband and I were honoured to be guests at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* in Madrid in order to study *Las Misiones Pedagógicas*, an energetic Spanish educational project that took place between 1931 and 1936, prior to the Spanish Civil War (Urtaza, 2006). Our historical research involved understanding social movements that may inspire the growth of the Art Hives Network, and learn in part, what worked, what didn’t, and perhaps, why.

The Spanish educational missions were a part of a vibrant, short-lived, cultural movement that involved a proactive group of university students, teachers, writers, musicians, and painters of Spain’s Second Republic. *Misiones Pedagógicas*, much like the U.S. Federal Arts Project’s (1935-1942) response to the Great Depression, brought the creative arts to thousands of people. Both projects ended abruptly due to war, but provide remarkable examples of what can happen when students and teachers prepare, plan, and push past academic walls. By way of trains, buses, pick-up trucks and

even mules, the *Misiones* students travelled into remote and isolated villages with musical instruments, puppets, costumes, wood to build outdoor stages and thousands of books. They set up puppet theatres, temporary galleries of famous oil painting reproductions from the Prado Museum, projected films in community squares, played music on gramophones, led children in dance and play, sparked community choirs, and set up 5,000 libraries with an average of 100 books per library. While supplying a utopian vision of education, *Misiones Pedagógicas* also believed that building relationships across divides and exchanging cultures was an important aspect of building an equitable and just society (Urtaza, 2006). Belenky, Bond and Weinstock (1997) call these poorly recognized, short lived and often forgotten collaborative creative learning environments, “a tradition that has no name” (p.11).

### **Method / Description of the experience**

This experiential workshop recreated in part, the methods and materials practiced by the community at La Ruche d’Art (The Art Hive). Located in a working class neighbourhood in St Henri, Montreal, La Ruche d’ Art is a lively and welcoming space, inviting everyone as an artist, especially those who are isolated or economically vulnerable, to create and develop their own public conversations, cultural events, and non-juried art exhibits. The community art studio is opened two days a week and other creative art therapies studios are held the rest of the week for groups, such as: a seniors group, cancer patient support group, street artist studio and young indigenous parents group.

Ideally, setting up a pop-up Art Hive for the duration of a conference brings forward conversations in a relaxed, experiential way. We have hosted Art Hives where mixing the public and conference participants added another layer of valuable exchange to the conference. Being limited by time, and access to creative reuse materials, inspired a more directive approach. For this workshop we offered small journal-making kits, prepared in Canada that combined the important elements of the studio: interesting recyclable materials, informal skill share (a particular binding method), and the freedom to develop or deviate from the project suggested

## **Results**

There is a great need today, to collaboratively innovate new ways to inspire, develop and practice methods of community–university partnerships. In Montreal, the Art Hives Network (<http://www.arthives.org>) developed at Concordia University has played a role in helping outline the role universities and other institutions play in society today. For example, it has provided evidence of the importance of service learning within classroom learning for university students (Timm-Bottos & Reilly 2015). It has also provided a model for the development of university “third space.” Like the Misiones Pedagógicas, La Ruche d’Art in St Henri is physically located between private space (home) and public space (work, university and other institutions), but we now know through sustained practice research, that third spaces can also be located at the edges of formal institutions. Soja (1996) expands the definition of third space by drawing on Lefebvre and Foucault, describing “first space” as that which can be mapped, “second space” as that which can be imagined, and “third space” containing both the real and the imagined. Third space invites seeing with a spatial imagination

(p.11). For Foucault, these “heterotopias,” represented, “the space in which we live, that draws us out of ourselves,” (Foucault, 1984, p. 48), requiring acceptance of ambiguity and vulnerability (Arhar, Niesz, Brossmann, Koebley, O’Brien, Loe & Black, 2013), in order to open oneself to different ways of seeing.

Conference workshops become another place to act out “third space.” As workshop participants entered the space, my husband Leo and I, greeted each participant and invited them to paint right away at a spontaneous painting wall and/or start with the journal-making materials. The group settled in to an hour of art making and storytelling with projected images of *La Ruche d’Art*. Participants expressed excitement and seemed to have been inspired by the lively conversation and art making that was interspersed through the visual presentation. Participants used the journal making materials to practice a new binding technique, or true to third space, developed novel ways (i.e. one journal became a hanging mobile of new possibilities) to achieve completely different innovative results.

## **Discussion**

It is often the creative reuse of discarded materials, rather than the purchase of new, traditional art materials, that leads to the spontaneous art making experiences. Materials offer a lot in developing the imaginative methods used in the space. Practically speaking, reusing partially used paints, glues, brushes, clay, fabrics, as well as other household donations, not only provide an endless supply of interesting materials, but contribute to the sustainability of the project.

At La Ruche d'Art, as donations began overwhelming the studio, students and staff set up the "Honey Pot," a household creative reuse depot. Materials are reorganized for reuse, and supply the 30 Art Hives in Montreal, helping to significantly reduce expenses. Increasing awareness about hyper-consumerism and environmental impact of consumer products has become an important topic for discussion and creative re-purposing has inspired other related community activities, including a university-wide institutional creative reuse depot.

Importantly, there is a personal and psychological process that accompanies the participant's use of discarded consumer goods, beautifully expressed by Oliver (2002) in the following quote.

*This process of distorting and deconstructing is the way in which "I" make the clichés of culture mine; it is a way of belonging that counteracts alienation from meaning and dominant culture. These distortions can be playful or angry, subversive or conservative, conscious or unconscious, but they must be creative and born from passion. They are ways of finding or creating the loving social space that can support an open psychic space. (p. 57)*

Opening to the inner spaces of learning about oneself and the world of relationships around us is implicit in the life of the community studio and university students play an important role in enlivening these processes. The service-learning component (Timm-Bottos & Reilly, 2015) is matched with the skills and fresh perspectives of engaged students. This exchange, involving spontaneous art making, skill sharing, and conversations with the community, sets up a non-hierarchical environment for everyone to be teachers and students for each other. In addition to formal course work, we practice, "Each One, Teach One," a method developed by African slaves who were not permitted education in the United States. These important

traditions of African American women's leadership have been devoted to lifting up entire communities and Art Hives welcome these and other diverse ways of knowing from all traditions, such as, street artists' survival practices, differing abilities ways of knowing, and indigenous science.

Over the past two years we have been exploring community engagement as a threshold concept for social innovation, which has evolved to include western and indigenous scientists expanding our perspectives through a series of interactive public conversations called, "The Science Shop." As art communities gather over time, we notice that we have begun to create a culture of "what works" to support meaningful and healthy community life. This practice has also begun to expand ideas about western scientific research as described by Arhar et al (2013):

*Research is seen here as a cultural space of multiple perspectives and demanding work on the part of the researcher(s) to examine and reshape his or her formal, course-based knowledge in light of a process that is often open-ended and unbounded. (p. 231)*

In third space, like at the Art Hive, "what seem to be oppositional categories can actually work together to generate new knowledges, new discourses, and new forms of literacy" (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004, p. 42). A participatory research practice that proposes to reorient experts to "learning from organic histories with local participants" (Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 27) may lead to what Freire describes as "a world in which it will be easier to love" (1989, p. 24) and may hold hope for a grassroots vision of a more just and peaceful world.

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