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# Creativity in Corvallis—Community Connections: Creating, Interpreting, and Giving Back with Kindergarten Students and High School Students

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## Abstract

This project focuses on community-based art education by highlighting the art project experience of kindergarten and high school students over the course of an academic year. The theoretical perspective for this series of projects used an arts-based inquiry approach which is experimental and reflexive in nature. The youngest students created two-dimensional drawings and collage projects from which they selected one project to be created in three-dimensional form by the high school students. This process demonstrated the development of complex creative thinking skills and openness to collaboration for both kindergartners and high school students as projects were reinterpreted and transformed into three dimensional forms. Additionally, the benefits of the work for the students and the community members were apparent through the feedback teachers received over the year. The project shows the positive impact of multi-age partnerships in arts education. It is a useful model for community-connected learning across the K-12 spectrum. University design students will extend this work by interpreting the two-dimensional and three-dimensional projects through a four-dimensional time-based lens.

## Keywords

Art Education, Community-Based, Two-Dimensional Art, Three-Dimensional Art, Multi-age Partners

## 1. Introduction

This collaboration focuses on inspiring the love of art in our youngest and oldest through a shared art-making experience that also gives back to the community.

We highlighted two-dimensional (2D) and three-dimensional (3D) art and design elements and principles with connections between the art projects and their meaning for kindergarteners and high school students.

Community-Based Art Education (CBAE) encompasses many different concepts as identified and detailed by Ulbricht (2005) including Informal Teaching, Organized Community Teaching, Outreach, Ethnography, and Public Art. The work presented here centers on informal teaching and outreach. Specifically, the informal teaching was incorporated in the high schoolers' work. Outreach was achieved through several displays and showcases of student artwork at the elementary school and the high schools. We developed several projects that enrich students' work through learning about the principles and elements of art.

Recent research underscores the value of comprehensive and extensive art education on children's creative thinking (Huang et al., 2025; Kwon, 2024). The empirical studies reveal that children's creative thinking skills are strengthened by consistent and extensive art education curricula. Carpenter (2019) highlights the complexity of defining the field of art education based on the multifaceted nature of the field. There are many ways to view art education from both educators' and practitioners' perspectives. Holochwost and others (2021) clearly delineate the challenges of defining art education based on children's social emotional development. They propose a differentiated definition of arts education based on the complexity and variety of the arts. Marshall (2016) presents an elementary school case for integrating metaphor in art education with a focus on a systems-based view of education. This project focuses on educators' perspectives at the elementary school and the high school levels. The case presented in this paper bridges these diverse perspectives by engaging kindergarteners in a 2D art project and the high school students in a 3D project that interprets and reflects the kindergarteners' drawn and painted designs.

Funding for the arts is always a challenge. We aimed to create a project that linked elementary school art projects with high school art projects to show students in the elementary schools the opportunities to create art that await them when they become high school students. This required access to ample materials for drawing, painting, and clay work. We are fortunate in the Corvallis School District that both the elementary school classrooms and the high school art studios are well equipped to support the students' creative endeavors. However, providing specific art and design materials for the schools is an ongoing cost with hundreds of students at the elementary schools.

Funds from the Laura B. Smith Faculty Scholar position at Oregon State University were used to provide support for materials for these projects. Laura B. Smith was a faculty member who taught art and interior design courses at Oregon State University from the 1940s through the 1960s. Her son, Murray Smith, and daughter-in-law, Linda Smith, honor her legacy with an endowed faculty scholarship for a faculty member in the Interior Design or Apparel Design studio programs within the Design Programs in the College of Business. The faculty member who is currently receiving the award, has focused her research on the design of

environments. This financial support aligns with her research by highlighting children's creativity throughout the K-12 years.

These project goals reflect the work of Carpenter and Gandara (2018) who describe the value of collaboration between schools and universities in the visual arts. Our ongoing collaboration helps students learn more about art and design throughout their K-12 education. This partnership involves an art teacher, Anicia Criscione, from two different elementary schools; an art teacher, Keith Moses, and a student teacher, Haley Hass, from one high school; an associate professor, Marilyn Read, from the university; and support for art materials from the university's Laura B. Smith faculty endowment. The joint effort is woven together across three different education levels in the community.

These art projects will be shared with students in the university's Design Core: Color Innovation course in the next academic year. The students will be analyzing the work with a focus on how the elementary school students created their drawings and paintings and how the high school students interpreted the kindergarteners' projects. They will then be asked how they will translate the 2D and 3D works into the 4th dimension of time and movement for a design project. The assignment will emphasize creating design projects that incorporate movement and time, along with the strengths of the 2D and 3D art elements and principles (Mueller, 2016).

## 2. Method

The research method used for this research is from an arts-based inquiry approach with emphasis on observation, reflection, and self-expression (Finley, 2005). Informal teacher observations were summarized as described below. Additionally, the displays of the student work at several different events along with displays at the elementary schools emphasized a focus on community-based art education outreach. The following sections describe the processes of project development along with the displays of the different student work.

Monster Project

The collaboration of their work has been presented at several venues in the community of Corvallis over the past year. The first project for the kindergarten students was to create a monster during the Autumn of this academic year. Students in the high school interpreted their drawings and created 3D versions of the monsters as seen in the display. They were displayed for the high school's annual event known as Kilnapalooza early in the academic year. See the following figure.

Garden Project

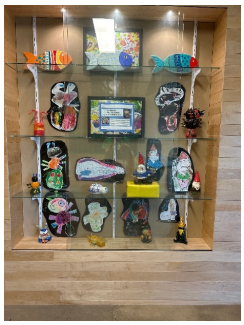
During the winter term, the youngest students in elementary school incorporated what they learned about the elements of art for the first stage, line, shape, and color. The kindergarteners learned a lot about themselves as well as the elements of art using different types of lines, shapes, and colors to create fantastical garden creatures including:

Garden Gnomes

Silly Slugs

Interesting Insects

The school and community displays are seen in the figures below:



The next section focuses on the individual designs for each of the garden creatures.

Garden Gnome

Line, sometimes considered the most basic element of art, is used to draw the Kinder Garden Gnome. Students used their fingers like magic wands to draw many types of lines in the air, from straight and diagonal, to curvy and bumpy. Then they used observational skills as well as their creativity to design a gnome on paper including facial expressions. Students chose between crayons, oil pastels, cake tempera paint, or watercolor to add color to their garden gnomes, giving each gnome even more individuality. The final touch was naming their gnome. The final projects are seen in the following figures.

Silly Slug

Combining literacy with art helps build a child's interest in reading and art because it helps build excitement with the stories and illustrations. After reading the

book, *Norman the Slug with the Silly Shell* by Sue Hendra, students used a combination of different shapes for the slug body, e.g. five circles, four squares, three triangles (building math skills). They chose whichever colors they wanted to use for the shapes as well as the color of paper they wanted to use to provide uniqueness for each slug. Then students chose a contrasting color to use for their donut. They used different tints of tempera paint to add glaze. They cut colorful shapes out of construction paper for sprinkles. They assembled their silly slug, and of course, gave their slug a name. All of the drawing, painting, and cutting were great developmentally appropriate skills for these young artists. The projects for the Silly Slug are seen in the figures as below:

Interesting Insect

These young artistic scientists were able to identify different parts of insects as they drew and painted these colorful creatures. They started by drawing the head, thorax, and abdomen of their insects. Then they added six legs, three on each side. Students chose between oil pastels, cake tempera paint, or watercolor to add color to their insects. They were encouraged to make their insects bold and bright, just like their personalities. The finishing touch included adding a name for their insect. The artwork showing the Interesting Insect is seen in the following figures:

Quotes from Kindergarteners:

*It makes me happy when experimenting with colors.*

*I was excited for the high schoolers making me the sculptures.*

*I like how they made the flowers like my flowers, yellow and blue.*

*It made me feel excited when they were making my Gnome.*

*I like the details.*

*I felt happy every time* (*and a lot of the kids were using the* "*ME TOO*" *hand gesture*).

The kindergartners enjoyed the process of creating and naming their artwork projects. They were thoughtful in their use of the principles and elements of art as seen in their work in the above figures. The displays of the artwork at the two schools were visual opportunities for students to pause and view their peers' work. Several staff members commented that children would gaze at the displays for long periods of time as if lost in contemplation. Seeing these interpretations by the high schoolers may have inspired analysis of the connections between the 2-D and 3-D designs.

Ceramics Project at the High School

Haley Hass, who is the student teacher for the Crescent Valley High School (CVHS) ceramics class, reflects here on the high school students' experiences building the 3D projects.

*After the students created these projects, they chose one to be carefully crafted into a sculpture by the high school ceramists at our local high school. The high school students choose which project they wanted to create using clay, incorporating the skills they are learning in their high school ceramics class.*

*As a student teacher in the CVHS ceramics class, I was really excited to be a part of this unique collaborative project, especially with how enthusiastic my students were when they had their first introduction to it. When the high schoolers heard we got all of the elementary students' drawings, they were very eager to choose which creature they got to bring to life. Many of them even asked if they could sculpt more than one kids' drawing, which really highlighted how excited they were to participate with this project.*

*Throughout the sculpting process, the high school students demonstrated amazing creativity and resourcefulness. Each ceramist took creative liberties and added some of their own interpretations and artistic touch to the original drawings. This combination of inspiration between the different age groups created a really innovative learning experience, with students experimenting with form, texture, and color.*

*This collaborative project also helped the high school students strengthen their hand-building techniques with coiling, slab building, and pinch-pot making. Many of the drawings also included really intricate details that would be pretty difficult to sculpt, as some of the elements were quite delicate. Because of this, the high schoolers had to think critically about their design decisions, making sure the sculptures were not only true to the original drawings but also didn't include too many fragile pieces. This experience not only helped the high school ceramists develop their artistic skills but it also instilled leadership qualities and a sense of*

*responsibility, as they understood the importance of delivering a special creation to the younger artists.*

The high school students developed metacognition as described by Briggs and DeLosa (2018) through analyzing, planning, brainstorming, and executing the clay projects of the kindergarteners paintings. As described above, the high schoolers spent significant time thinking critically about the optimal way to convey the kindergarteners' 2D projects. The ceramists incorporated extensive details in the designs as shown in the figures. The kindergarteners also developed early metacognition by planning their projects with analysis, planning, and brainstorming for their paintings. For example, for the garden project, they needed to plan the type of insect they would draw, how the colors, shapes, and textures would be incorporated in the painting; the expression of the insect, and the name of the insect. These processes involved extensive thought and skill for both kindergartners and high schoolers.

Additionally, the kindergarteners learned about texture and form as well with 3D project work. They created snails out of air-dry clay and ladybugs out of kiln-fired clay so they have a beginning understanding of the complexity involved in creating sculptures. They compared the similarities and differences between the two mediums and discussed the benefits of using each material. This background helped the kindergarteners to understand the process the high schools used when translating their 2D designs into 3D projects.

The youngest artists had the opportunity to meet the high school ceramicists at the Corvallis School District Art *pARTy* where the high school students gave the gift of their clay sculpture to the young artists. This was open to the community to attend and celebrate the creativity in Corvallis. When the kindergarteners viewed the creation the high school artists made for them, they were in awe. These gave the kindergartners not only a gift of a beautiful, sculpted garden creation, they also demonstrated thoughtful leadership.

During Spring Student Led Parent/Teacher Conferences, kindergartners were able to share this collaborative project with their parents. The kindergarten art was paired next to the high school ceramics pieces in display case at both schools for all 500+ families to enjoy as they came into each building.

## 3. Reflection on the Displays

In each of the two elementary schools there is something quite magical—a display case. In the display case resides a collection of the clay sculptures created by the high school students, inspired by the kinder and first grade drawings. At first glance, this is a charming project capturing the creativity and connection of the community. But there is more.

The youngest students experienced something magical as their special drawings were turned into detailed sculptures. This validates the creativity of the five- and six-year-olds and is a way to continue encouraging their imagination and love of art.

This display case has another role. Students are allowed to visit it, almost like a quiet trip to a museum. They wander slowly down the entry way, matching the sculptures to the pictures. They point out small details and make careful observations. This calms students who may feel overwhelmed or anxious. The display case provides a gentle pause and a place to refocus.

Parents, community members, even district staff stop by to admire the collaboration. They are struck by the whimsy of the drawings and special attention the high schoolers used to create the clay creatures. It is a display of public education at its finest.

It is rare for a single project to have such an impact. But this one has. Through the caring hands of teenagers and imaginative spark of kinders, it is a reminder that learning is joyful, art is powerful, and school is a magical place where all of this happens.

## 4. Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

We are thrilled with the experiences we have had with the elementary school students and high school students over this year as they have worked on these projects with focus, creativity, and care. We believe their generosity of spirit and willingness to experiment with creating different art projects will serve them well as they move forward in their educational journeys.

In the future, the two art teachers hope to host a Garden Gala to have additional artwork on display as we continue our partnership across the ages. A possible future direction may also be to incorporate the findings from Kwon's (2024) study on the priorities and needs of K-12 teachers as compared with those of college and university arts and design program instructors.

At the university, we will be extending this project by incorporating a project for the second-year design students in a Color Innovation course. The project will be a 4-D design that is based on the 2-D drawings and paintings created by the kindergarteners and the 3-D sculptures created by the high schoolers. To see how university students interpret both 2-D and 3-D work in a design that conveys movement and storytelling will be a creative and thought-provoking challenge for the university students.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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