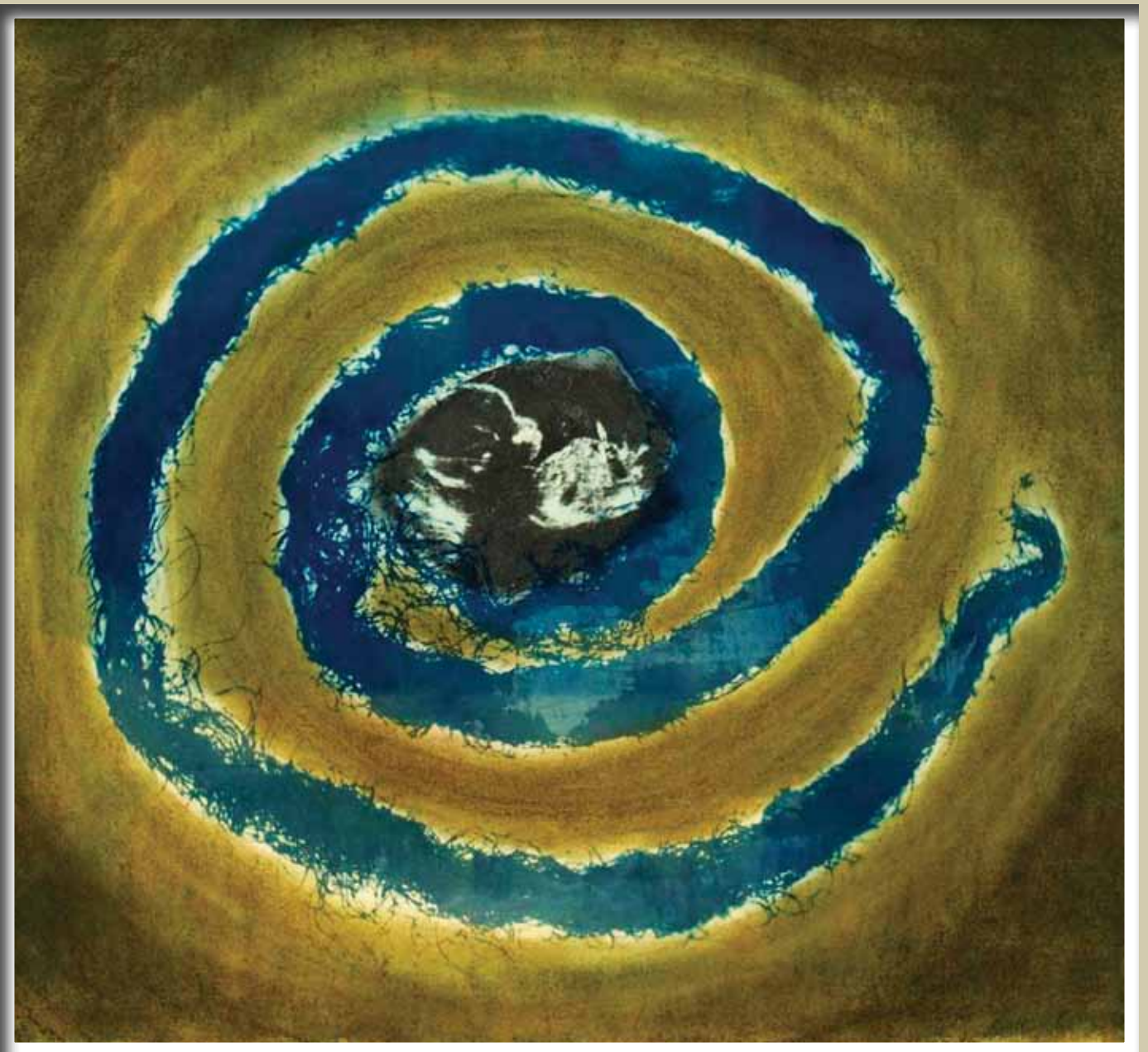


ALL ABOUT

MENTORING

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Issue 42 • Winter 2012



William H. Maehl: 1930 - 2011

“ ... Innovation in adult program and the new forms and processes with which adult educators have experimented have broken the constraints of older systems that prevented change. By asking questions such as, By what different means can we assist adults to reach the learning outcomes they seek? or, How can we reduce the barriers that prevent adult learners from participating in educational programs? adult education innovators have driven institutions to explore alternative processes to reach agreed-upon ends. The mold of old forms has been broken. The success of so many new forms establishes the precedent for future experimentation.”

– William H. Maehl

Lifelong Learning at Its Best:
Innovative Practices in Adult Credit Programs
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 282

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Central New York Arts Learning Community: Reflections on an Inspiring First Year

Deborah Holler, Peggy Lynn, Yvonne Murphy, Heidi Nightengale, Maureen Kravec, Laurie Seamans and Alan Stankiewicz, Central New York Center; Tom Huff, Artist-in-Residence

In January 2010, the Central New York Center started planning for an Arts Learning Community (ALC) where students meet with one another and study mentors in three Saturday residencies at our East Syracuse office supported by online and other activities. The 2011-2012 academic year marked the first year of the Arts Learning Community with a total of 15 different offerings and 56 student participants. In our first year we had stone sculptor and mixed-media artist, Tom Huff (Seneca Cayuga), as our artist-in-residence. This year, our artist-in-residence is Craig Thornton, a local playwright, actor and film maker. Craig started the recent Sept. 22 residency with a lunchtime presentation and discussion of "Creative Tools and the Creative Process." He later gave a workshop on writing the "10 Minute Play." Students will next send drafts of their scripts to Craig for feedback and we expect to hold a reading of the finished student plays at our last residency meeting of the term. Ultimately, we created the Arts Learning Community and artist-in-residence position to provide students with greater interdisciplinary access to the arts, increased potential for focused and/or studio-based work and to promote local art and artists' activities as models for ways to be a practicing artist in Central New York.

What follows are the reflections of the seven mentors and the artist-in-residence who participated in our first year of work.

The Artist's Journey, Fall 2011; Fantasy Art and Literature, Spring 2012

Maureen Kravec and Laurie Seamans

In an economic recession, adult students – and their mentors – want to make every credit count. The press and Internet advise students about what is "safe" to study – usually business, technology and health – to become employable. In such a climate, why encourage students to study arts and humanities? Our students' creativity, enthusiasm and success during the first year of the Central New York Center's Arts Learning Community may contain some answers.

A central principle of andragogy is encouraging students to become mindful learners who can integrate their experiential learning and their formal education. In our fall 2011 Arts Learning Community study, *The Artist's Journey*, we asked our students to reflect on their own creative paths, and hoped they would find the opportunity to take a step forward. Our students did not disappoint us; each produced work that

documented growth, integrated the personal and the academic, and in two cases, led to new avenues of expression.

In the fall term, our readings were the sort of Jungian texts that inspire some students and teachers, and madden others: Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd Edition (Studio City, Calif.: Wise, 2007) and Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Tarcher, 2002). At our first meeting, we discussed the archetypal hero's journey, and students read from some of their "morning pages," in keeping with Cameron's urging to establish a habit of taking time to write in order to develop their ideas and inspirations. The students seemed a bit unsure and uneasy, but as we discussed their ideas, we realized they had some interests in common. Interestingly, too, as their projects evolved, they developed the journey theme beyond the purely personal. One student, a playwright, worked on a concept he had had about the personal and moral price of freedom for an African-American slave and his descendants. The story had a supernatural element and a multigenerational cast of characters. Our photography student (who did not complete the study) had an idea for a journey related to solo space travel. Our two other students



Bamboo scattered on table in front of student Gwen Lubey working on a project for Art, Environment and Activism.

PHOTO: ALAN STANKIEWICZ

both volunteered in animal welfare activities. One, a graphic design student, realized how important the cats she had adopted were to her and what her real interest was after college. Her project demonstrated the connection between the cats' stories and her own personal journey. The other, a human services student who volunteered in canine rescue, developed a large diptych made of bark from the trees in her yard, documenting the journey of a black lab from abuse to rescue and happiness. Her piece, "Bark," reflects both her concern for animal welfare and her desire to express her message using natural materials (bark) otherwise left to waste in the yard – a dual message to the dog's plight. This student, who took this study as an elective, discovered a new talent and went on to enroll in the Earth Arts group in the spring.

In the spring, we co-taught another study, Fantasy Art and Literature, with two participants – a visual arts student and a creative writing student. Our plan was to ask them to read about and explore the nature of the fairy folk, and to create a fairy house or habitat. The students transformed our suggestion into their own final project, on which they collaborated. Our visual arts student (another animal lover) initially planned to draw a fairy steed and a race in the gardens surrounding Saratoga Springs, where her family had vacationed; our creative writer planned a story using fairy gold loosely based on '80s rock musicians. Their project evolved: the house became a birdhouse on the protagonist's property, where she moved to start over after a failed marriage. In a night of revelry, the fairies help her see her that her "ex" is not worth her sorrows, and she meets a kind and handsome brownie who bears a striking resemblance to both Jon Bon Jovi and the paper deliveryman she meets the next morning! In addition to portraying scenes from the fairy race, our visual arts student created a series of portraits of fairy "Cyndi Leaper," "Jonovi," and other characters in the story.

We watched our students create integrative, experience-based, reflective learning activities. An unexpected commonality seemed to be interest in animals and in the natural world. Each student's project evolved from the initial conception often into



PHOTO: ALAN STANKIEWICZ

Rock, Paper, Scissors group discussing making handmade children's picture books.

something quite different, more personally and aesthetically satisfying. Most of our students had vocational or avocational goals in the arts, and chose creative final projects that enabled them to develop their skills. One might say the overall ambience (for both female and male students) in both studies was eco-feminist: students thought not only about themselves, but also about maintaining healthy relationships with the natural world.

Art, Environment and Activism, Fall 2011; Nature Drawing, Spring 2012

Alan Stankiewicz

As a celebration of the arts, the spirit of the Arts Learning Community contributes to the culture of Central New York by adding the studio element, using the role of the artist as a way of looking at things with an inventive eye and from a critical perspective. As a model, the Arts Learning Community and its residency component provides a platform for critique and criticism, both essential in preparing students for a future in the arts. Specifically in the visual arts, this is achieved in such studies as Nature Drawing, Photography and Photoshop, and Printmaking. At Empire State College, the

elusive studio experience is often addressed by cross registration; the Arts Learning Community allows us access to the artist studio through the immediacy of understanding visual arts materials while sharing creative solutions in a studio setting. For many, this may appear elementary, but for students whose goal is to be accepted into a Master of Arts program after finishing their degree at the college, such studio tools are important in defining their visual work and how they chose to communicate their ideas.

If one accepts the notion of artist as thinker and inventor, the Arts Learning Community is dependent on a multidisciplinary environment. This not only informs the art student but also invites students from other area of studies to participate in the creative process. Found in this collaboration are diverse perspectives expanding the definition of the arts while creating applications across disciplines.

This was evident in the Arts Learning Community Student Showcase exhibition in the spring of 2012 presented at the Central Arts Gallery housed in the Central New York Center in Syracuse. The quality of the work highlighted the



PHOTO: MICHELLE MORETIN

Michele Cooper and Rick Pallatto performing at the First Annual Student Arts Showcase.

diversity of the studies offered through the Arts Learning Community. Equally important, the exhibition embraced a complexity of mediums addressing the many environmental issues framing the debut theme of the Arts Learning Community, “Art and Natural Environments.” Exhibited were sculptures from naturally found objects, inventive books, digital imagery, collages and drawings. Furthering the importance of the arts in a liberal arts institution, the opening of the exhibition included a coffee house where students shared other compositions in music and the written word.

Rock, Paper, Scissors: Creating Children’s Books That Explore the Natural World, Fall 2011

Yvonne Murphy and Heidi Nightengale

Of central importance to the Learning Community model is certainly what students bring and take away in their collaborations and communal learning experiences; however, the benefit to collegial relationships and individual teaching practices also is immense and shouldn’t be under-recognized. As Laufgraben and Shapiro offer in their *Sustaining and Improving*

Learning Communities (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), the very structure of ideal learning communities, including collaborative team-teaching, paired or clustered studies, a faculty-generated over-arching interdisciplinary theme, have tremendous potential to help foster different approaches and reinvigorate faculty investment and innovation in their offerings. They suggest that “team taught programs represent the most extensive approach in terms of curricular integration and faculty involvement” (p. 7). This was certainly our approach and experience in co-creating a study where students could research and study diverse examples of children’s picture books, write an original manuscript and then create physical manifestations of their book.

In a sense, we created the study we wish we could have taken as undergraduates. Both poets and teachers of children’s literature, we leaned on each other’s more specialized expertise (Heidi: a published children’s book author; Yvonne: well-versed and practiced in book arts) to fulfill the promise of the study. The sense that we were stretching and growing as an interdependent unit served as an encouraging example for our students and allowed for/catalyzed greater

experimentation and creative risk-taking on their end. Students naturally more comfortable in the visual arts attempted rhyming couplets in their narratives, while the experienced writers opened up more confidently to the reality that good illustration isn’t solely figure drawing or representational. It made us take several second looks at the ways an imaginative idea can be expressed and experimented with simultaneously in different mediums as a vehicle or impetus for deeper discovery and complexity. We both continue to take this forward into our own practices, both as educators and practicing artists.

Earth Arts, Spring 2012

Deborah Holler and Tom Huff

The blended (ANGEL component) study group, Earth Arts, offered students an opportunity to work together at a distance on a group project. Our three students lived hundreds of miles away from each other, and were all in their final term. Two were concentrators in The Arts AOS, while one, who had always wanted to “do art” was in the Community and Human Services AOS. During our first meeting, they were introduced to concepts and artists working in Eco Art (repurposed materials) and Environmental Art (working with natural materials and/or landscape) through Web resources that included YouTube clips and artists’ websites. Later, when they returned home, they were able to revisit and expand on the Web resources and write response papers telling about their understanding and inspirations for the Earth Arts course. They also were introduced to the 2011 artist-in-residence, stone sculptor Tom Huff (Seneca Cayuga), who shared his experiences and artworks in “found” natural materials.

At first, students were hesitant and challenged by the idea of working on an art project together, but then quickly began sharing ideas in the ANGEL discussion feature. They also met in another ANGEL discussion space, “Studio 1,” to post photos of their individual work in progress, as well as components of the group project. By the second group meeting, they told about their inspiration for their project, a poem by Shel Silverstein (*A Light in the Attic*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1981):



PHOTO: MICHELLE MORETIN

Mixed Media project by Melissa Clary, CHS student, for Earth Arts study.

Peckin’

The saddest thing I ever did see
Was a woodpecker peckin’ at a plastic tree.
He looks at me, and “Friend,” says he,
“Things ain’t as sweet as they used to be.”

The students also discussed their plans, materials and which components they would work on individually. They came to our third meeting prepared to work, excited and eager to make “community” art together with Tom Huff. Their boisterous enthusiasm and the weird variety of materials they carried through the halls caused a stir among students and staff who peaked into the temporary “studio” throughout the day.

The Final Project, complete with a tree made from plastic bags and covered with bark chips, a woodpecker made from wood and found materials, and a crooked sign with poem, came together between the last group meeting and the Student Showcase Open Mic session (more on this from Peggy Lynn follows). At that event, these three students took the stage proudly and told the audience about their experience and inspiration, and the way in which the work fit the emerging categories of eco art and environmental art. Most importantly, they told the audience

and wrote in their final response papers about the ways in which they had recreated themselves as a community of artists through their group project.

Adirondack Song and Story, Fall 2011; Protest Songs, Spring 2012

Peggy Lynn

In thinking of ways to add more “community” to the Arts Learning Community, we had a brilliant idea of hosting an open mic. This was in addition to the gallery art show. It was held on June 7, 2012, the same evening as the gallery opening. It was held in the auditorium of the Empire State College offices in Syracuse. All of the faculty involved with the Arts Learning Community had announced the event to their students, those

in ALC studies and any others who might be interested. One student from the Adirondack Song and Story study volunteered to emcee the evening. His eloquence and wry humor made for a seamless program. Several of Yvonne Murphy’s writing students read their short stories and essays. One student from Yvonne’s and Heidi Nightengale’s study on making children’s books did a dramatic performance of his rhyming picture book about a persnickety but hungry uncle with the constant refrain: “No, thanks, I’ll just have salad!!” A few of Alan Stankiewicz’s visual arts students participated and explained the concept of their pieces. Laurie Seamans and Maureen Kravec staged

a reading of the first act of their student’s play (the student was away performing in Pittsburgh at the time). We even had vocal performances by Nicole Rand, a work-study student, and Michelle Moretin, a professional staff member. This event met several goals. Students and faculty were able to see each other’s work and envision new ideas for collaboration and support. The entire Central New York Center community came together and was moved by the arts. Creative expression was given voice and value and the artists among us were afforded an opportunity to express ourselves. After this successful and invigorating inaugural event, we definitely plan to make it an annual one.



PHOTO: MICHELLE MORETIN

Panels created by Melissa Clary for Root and Tree study.