

A Long Poem: Take Time to...

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Abstract

In “A Long Poem: Take Time to ...”, I relate how the people on one city block engaged in a community based “long poem” art project during the Covid-19 pandemic. Arranged in two parts, this paper first looks at the literature on community art and its impact on personal and social health and wellbeing. Second, I describe how a street community art and poetry project led to social engagement, dialogue, healthy interaction, and good memories.

Keywords: Community art; Covid-19; engagement; poetry; writing.

Introduction

“Those who do not have the power over the story that dominates their lives -- power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change --truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts” (Salman Rushdie, Quotable Quotes).

The Covid-19 pandemic extracted power from most people’s daily lives, but individuals and communities still maintained a semblance of power to deconstruct, retell, and rethink their response to challenging extenuating circumstances. A common theme during the Covid-19 pandemic was the frustration with homeschooling suddenly thrust mostly upon mothers, as they continued with their own work from home.

Fathers also felt the impact of confinement, but traditionally mothers pick up the extra load (Santos Machado et al., 2019; Staniscuaski et al., 2020). Since my children were grown and no longer at home, I sympathized with the parents. My ideas to help by holding a home cooking, sewing, or woodworking class were not possible because of social distancing. Then I landed on an idea that could and did work: a community sidewalk chalk project. I brainstormed a few ideas, jotted down a rough draft and sent it to a mother down the street asking whether her teenage artist daughter would like to participate. An

enthusiastic response back and we had a project with a few more neighbours expressing interest to join.

Since “[r]esearch on community art is relatively new and scarce” (Lowe, 2020, p. 359), it is important to explore its impact and benefit. Art can either be placed or localised in a public place (Verschelden et al., 2012). Art placed in a public space is usually made by the artist in a private studio and then installed and later publicly revealed; the artist may never interact with the public directly. On the other hand, art localised in a public space is made on site, either because it does not fit in an indoor studio or because it has “site-specific features” (Verschelden et al., 2012, p. 280).

The “Take Time to...” long poem community art project was localised, both because it was too large to fit in a studio and it was site-specific. The street became the studio because an art piece measuring 4.9 ft. by 387 ft. would not exactly fit into a regular art studio.

Arranged in two parts, this paper first looks at the literature on community art and its impact on personal and social health and wellbeing. Second, I describe how a street community art and poetry project led to social engagement, dialogue, healthy interaction, and good memories fostered during a difficult time.

Literature on community art and its health benefits

The late 1960s brought social and political change in Europe and North America, which also changed the art world (Crehan, 2011). During this time, three British artists, Martin Goodrich, Jim Ives, and Barbara Wheeler-Early, who had a transformative experience in their fine-art education,

were convinced that art could transform lives in general. They resisted the conventional elitist gallery art that they had been trained for and imagined bringing art to all people, instead of just those who could afford entrance to art galleries or had a particular taste in art. Their goal was for art to be inclusive rather than exclusive, and for it to be community oriented instead of individualistic. “The art world had enormous power; it defines what counts as art, what does not and what makes some art good and some bad” (Crehan, 2011, p. 18). Ives and Goodrich grew up in working-class families and had observed that the “art world was cut off from ordinary life: There was a big world out there that wasn’t touched by galleries, there was the general public that hadn’t been really engaged in this creative process in the way we thought was possible” (Crehan, 2011, p. 34).

Moving art away from a traditional interpretation and implementation led to community art with motives other than the usual power and money. Art became a medium for activism, a different kind of empowerment, transformation, and even healing. Gray (2012) says that communal art projects promote empowerment and enhance participation. Community psychology has pioneered empowerment as a complex process occurring on multiple personal, community, and organizational levels that directly strengthens and builds capacity for social change (Jacobs, 2010). Psychological empowerment refers to a person’s ability to decide and take control over their own health decisions; community empowerment refers to a group’s ability to manage health challenges; organizational empowerment refers to how well the public and private sectors cooperate to strengthen the community (Jacobs, 2010; Israel et al., 1994). Not only does art have the potential for being an effective medium for empowerment and social change, but also “creativity is a necessary, ordinary, and universal human activity” (Clover, 2007, p. 514). Clover (2007) says that “[t]he imagination and creativity are powerful tools inherent to all human beings and in all societies that can enable risk-taking, reclaim space, reinvigorate community development, and engagement by creatively and simultaneously exercising and contesting power within the neo-conservative landscape” (p. 513).

In her article “Feminist Aesthetic Practice of Community Development: The Case of Myths and Mirrors Community Arts” Clover (2007) describes the process whereby groups of people come together to engage in unique art projects. With the assistance of an artist, the group collectively designs and creates an artistic representation of the social issues they are facing. The aims of the art projects are to promote healing, belonging, acting publicly together, celebrating the public work, and providing opportunity for community discussion (Clover, 2007). We often lack imagination for creative possibilities, and yet, when faced with difficulties, we tend to create new imaginary worlds in which our challenges fade, allowing for internal empowerment to supersede the lack of empowerment our situation presents (Clover, 2006; Williamson, 1992). In our imaginary worlds we strive to understand our surroundings, and Vieira (2019) says that “[b]odies are essential in processes of literate meaning making” (p. 21). Meaning making and deconstruction happen through art and writing that does not necessarily fit into the gallery art of the past, but rather onto the roughness of streets and into sidewalk cracks.

Community art leaves a footprint of a group’s identity. Jokela (2008) identifies as an environmental artist and claims that places have a more profound effect on him than people. He was always interested in the “marks people left on the landscape: like reindeer fences, lumberjacks’ cabins, villages along a river, and fishery buildings on the Arctic Ocean” (Jokela, 2008, p. 3). “I could experience the narratives infused in these objects and feel how people had found their place amid nature, on this planet, and under this sky” (Jokela, 2008, p. 3).

Sidewalks are the generic footprints that city architects designed as safe pedestrian transitways: pedestrians are sometimes included and sometimes excluded. Sidewalks almost always have cracks in them and when they age, they gain even more cracks. Verschelden et al. (2012) talk about “urban cracks as arenas for social and political struggle” (p. 282). Urban cracks are a sort of palimpsest, something reused or changed but still revealing a trace of what was previously there:

“Urban cracks demonstrate that destruction is part of construction. A palimpsest is not simply a multi-layered piece of parchment, but rather a fragment with a destroyed base. A palimpsestuous reading of urban cracks can reveal more about the precarious nature of urban

planning and city life. Precisely because of this, architects and urban planners often use the palimpsest as a metaphorical concept in urban development” (Verschelden et al., 2012, p. 283).

Using sidewalk chalk as our medium of our community art project was apropos, because of its transient nature dependent on the weather for how long it lasts. Even when rain washes its distinct features, a faded shadow remains with blurred lines of color and shapes.

Surface and Ryan (2018) talk about the power of combining art and writing. The workshops they observed:

emphasize process over product – slowing down, making detailed observations, drawing on emotions, playing with words and ideas, sharing and reflecting. We highlight parallels between the writing and art- making processes, and frame the literary and historical contexts of the works of art. Our goal is to enable visitors to deepen their practice as writers – whatever that practice may be – while discovering real connections to works of art and the creative process” (Surface & Ryan, 2018, p. 356).

Writing about art provides depth to the experience. Lowe (2000) suggests that art can bring cohesion to the breakdown of social fabric. “Community art serves as a catalyst for developing community because it is both the setting for group solidarity building and the symbol of group identity” (p. 357). The “Take Time to...” community art project brought cohesion in a tumultuous time, provided a transient and precarious footprint of Covid-19, and furnished a space for dialogue.

The long poem in art

With the sudden change in everyday routines, society seemed to stand still in hushed expectation when Covid-19 hit. Young people that were otherwise used to packing up books in backpacks and trundling off to school in the morning, were now suddenly at home with various instructions on how to complete school work independently. Parents that were otherwise off to work, were now at home either laid off from their jobs or expected to fulfill duties and carry out tasks remotely, all while keeping kids engaged in remote learning at the same time. No one had the psychological power to make decisions about their own health, and control was far beyond a personal choice. In an environment where concern for personal and community health was very high, there was widespread acceptance that personal and community disempowerment was preferable to individual access to the power and freedom to move where we wanted. With a world turned upside down and an out-of-control sensation, empowerment and participation in an art project (Gray, 2012) seemed like one way that a community could engage in an activity that they felt they had control over, as artificial as that may seem.

My rough draft of my idea for the sidewalk chalk long poem “Take Time to ...” consisted of a list of ideas, which I sent to my friend:

Hi Amy,

How is it going at your house? Hope you are all staying well. I was wondering whether your daughter would like to be part of a community art project using the medium of sidewalk chalk? All from a distance of course. I thought it could be called something like "Take time to..." and we could draw sidewalk chalk illustrations on sidewalk blocks along our side of the street, starting at one end and ending at the other end. Each numbered word or phrase would be on a sidewalk block along with an illustration or two. Whoever participates can add whatever ideas they like. The script could go something like this: Take time to sing; laugh; make music; read; swing; garden; applaud frontline workers like healthcare professional, grocery clerks, truck; make special meals; wave; call family and friends; blow balloons; make snow people; make sidewalk chalk paintings; smile; bake; climb trees; splash in puddles; do art; do crafts; sail paper sailboats; draw; paint; pray; make cookies; bake bread; clean house; talk with neighbors at a distance; care; think; do yoga; look at the clouds; enjoy sunsets; play an instrument; pull weeds (or not); write; do taxes (or not); dress up; drum; jump up and down; learn a new language; Take time to

Improvisation welcome.

We would always stay far apart from each other and illustrate our individual sidewalk blocks.

Helen

My friend's daughter was up for the challenge. When a sunny day arrived, we were ready to start with a few buckets of sidewalk chalk on different locations on the block. Mothers, fathers, and children of all ages participated as we covered about 70 sidewalk squares with art and word messages. The message started on both ends of the street: "Take Time to..." The blocks in between featured words and the accompanying drawings like: splash in puddles, sail paper boats, read, and garden. The poem could be read from either direction.

When the community sidewalk chalk art was finished, we sat back and watched community members walk by and enjoy the art. As children passed by, engaged in the activity prompts like jumping up and down, or adding their piece with chalk we had left out for further participation. Adults slowed down as they laughed and talked about what they were reading. We did not hear the dialogues that the art inspired, but we did see the smiles. The sidewalk chalk art provided conversation, interest, laughter, and interaction before the rain washed it all away.

Community building was a strong proponent of the community art projects that Lowe (2000) observed. Although in our project, by nature of the situation, we were required to work individually, we nevertheless all worked on the same larger project, which also established community in a unique way. The narratives and drawings illustrated how the people on our street felt about the situation, and although they were powerless to change the loneliness of self-isolation, they had the power to pick up chalk and convey a message that inspired others. Art is a powerful tool that has the ability to prompt civic dialogue, engagement, and the imagination for change to occur (Clover, 2006). Writing about our community art project and analyzing its role and impact provided depth to the experience. Vieira (2019) does not claim that writing is an automatic panacea for all societal ills, and although the long poem community art project could not heal the community of Covid-19, it could provide a remedial kind of retelling and rethinking of our new environment that was lifegiving.

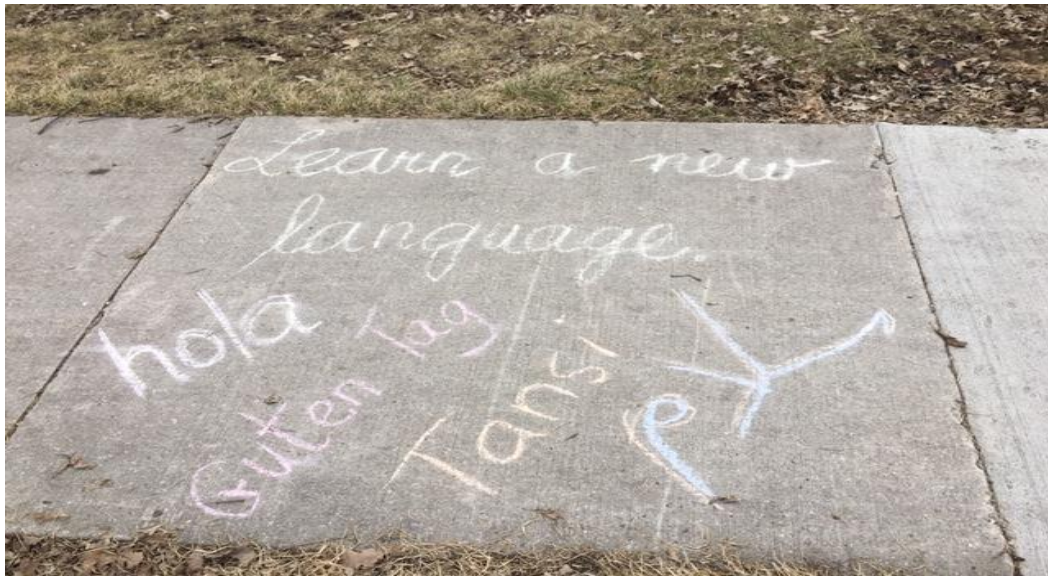
The children on the street remembered the sidewalk chalk painting long after the rain had washed it away. Recently, on a sunny afternoon when friends were over, we brought the sidewalk chalk out to make some drawings. Without notifying the neighborhood children who had participated on the "Take Time to..." project, suddenly there they were, running down the sidewalk wanting to know whether they could join in on our sidewalk painting again. Of course....

Artists: Buxton Road Neighbours
Fresh Air Studio

Title: A Long Poem: Take Time to...

Medium: Sidewalk chalk
Dimensions: 4.9 ft. x 387 ft.
Gift to the neighborhood











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About the Author

Dr. Helen Lepp Friesen teaches in the Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications department at The University of Winnipeg. Outstanding points in her career are meeting and having the privilege of working with hundreds of enthusiastic, talented students. Her research and writing interests are multimodal writing in culturally-diverse classes, including writing classes in prison. During her Research Study leave in 2019, Friesen taught a Composition course at San Quentin State Prison north of San Francisco and also conducted research on the topic of teaching and taking classes in prison through Adams State University in Colorado. She enjoys outdoor activities such as skating, snow sculpting, biking, tennis, running, and of course sidewalk chalk.