

Collaboration Beyond Words: Using Poetic Collage to Cultivate Community With Students and Colleagues

Candance Doerr-Stevens, Teresa Layden, and Stephen Goss

Abstract

In this article, we illustrate the experience of three literacy educators who harnessed online, collaborative platforms to cultivate community within their classrooms and with their colleagues. Through the use of creative practices including digital poetry, selfie collage, and curriculum sharing through video conferencing, the authors invited their students and professional peers to reflect on their perspectives and experiences related to social issues through the use of multimodal and media resources for composing. This article includes examples of creations from this context, including mentor text work, as well as implications for creativity and collaboration with students and colleagues.

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Arts experiences, aesthetic experiences are intrinsically valuable ... No encounters can release imagination in the way engagement with works of art or aesthetic enactments can release it. Imagination, as is well known, is the capacity that enables us to move through the barriers of the taken-for-granted and summon up alternative possibilities for living, for being in the world. (Greene, 1994, p. 18)

Though most principals, superintendents and teachers have a desire to do better and are working as hard as they can to provide a quality education to every student they serve, the road is rough and the going is slow. The lead villain in this frustrating drama is the loss of community in our schools and in society itself. If we want to rewrite the script to enable good schools to flourish, we need to rebuild community. Community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort. (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xi)

In the assertion prefaced above, the late educational philosopher, Maxine Greene, emphasizes the value of aesthetic experiences for engagement and criticality during a time of increased accountability measures being placed on teachers. Alongside Greene, school leadership scholar, Thomas Sergiovanni, urges educators to invest in each other and their immediate professional communities as steps leading toward professional wellness and democratic communities. Although written nearly three decades ago, calls for cultural practices that support creative problem solving, teacher livelihood, and democratic societies remain strong.

For Teresa Layden, a middle and high school English teacher for more than 20 years, intentional efforts toward arts-based learning and community building became the hallmarks of education and engagement during a time of remote teaching and learning due to recent global health crises. Although the socio-political challenges and global health concerns facing the teaching profession have led to many

educators retiring early or seeking other professional opportunities (cf. Sokal et al., 2020; Will, 2022), Teresa leaned into her professional networks for support and curricular inspiration. Seeking increased student engagement, she launched new, multimedia projects with her students, replacing traditional research papers with multimodal inquiry and arts-based expressions to investigate issues of environmental concern.

Like any educator experimenting with new practices, Teresa had reservations about how the new projects would be received. *What would the students create? Would they feel comfortable taking risks with their research and writing? Would they share their work in the zoom classroom? Would they turn on their cameras?* Despite the uncertainties, Teresa launched the multimedia projects with a willingness to embrace transformation both within her practices and her students' approach to them. By integrating a call to imagination and intentional community into her methodology, Teresa was able to harness the capacity to "move through barriers" and envision new possibilities for being, living, and working in the world.

Teresa is not alone in her experience. Several educators are experimenting with curriculum and collegial collaboration to find innovative ways to cultivate restorative and sustainable teaching practices both in their classrooms and with colleagues from across the profession (cf. Bajaj & Tow, 2021; Baumber et al., 2021; Burns et al., 2018; Wolter, 2021). In this article, we illustrate the creative collaborations of educators, specifically the authors of this article—three educators in the field of English literary arts, as they harnessed arts-based learning and inquiry to revitalize their connections with their students and colleagues. Through the use of creative practices such as digital poetry, selfie-collage, and curriculum sharing through video conferencing, the authors were able to build spaces of creative collaboration that reached into and beyond the classroom.

Literature Review

Teacher Solidarity, Collective Inquiry, and Aesthetic Experience

Education as a profession is not unfamiliar with the hazards of teacher exhaustion and attrition. Such ailments have plagued the field of education for decades, leading many to leave the profession (Guin, 2004; Kraft & Papay, 2014, Learning Policy Institute, 2018; Pressley, 2021). Recent socio-political challenges and global health crises have intensified these issues for teachers in North America (cf. Sokal et al., 2020; Will, 2022). Despite these occupational challenges, a number of educators are experimenting with professional practices to cultivate restorative and sustainable teaching practices both in their classrooms and with colleagues from across the profession (cf. Bajaj & Tow, 2021; Cohen & Calderón, 2021). Similar to professional development models such as "collaborative professionalism," which promotes relationship building and collegial trust alongside focused applications of research-based teaching methods (cf. Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018a), these restorative educational practices center people and story alongside productivity as the ingredients of successful communities and collaborations (Wolter, 2021). In other words, deeper collaborations happen when the solidarity of the people involved, and the integrity of the methods used, are adequately addressed, leading to greater learning for both teachers and students (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018b).

Considered collectively, these people-oriented practices allow educators to connect with one another and their professional practice in empowering ways, a collegial stance some are calling “humanization” or “pedagogies of solidarity” (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Zembylas, 2013). Zembylas (2013) defines pedagogical solidarity as collaborative labor that goes beyond general consensus building toward actions grounded in empathy and that effectively “break patterns of subordination” (p. 516). In other words, acknowledging another’s humanity involves more than showing up for a video call. It involves empathy-based listening, vulnerability, and constant interrogation and effort toward reducing injustice. Also exploring the critical potentials of solidarity, Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) presents three modes of pedagogical solidarity: relational, transitive, and creative. Relational and transitive modes focus on a group’s capacity to revise professional cultures through collective action that happens both in relation to others as well as from within. Creative solidarity emphasizes the power of poetic modes to rearrange hierarchical relations. In short, through releasing our imaginations with multimodal, arts-based practices of communication and sharing, educators are able to challenge and rewrite taken-for-granted practices and dictates of the profession, in ways not possible with words alone.

For some educators, the restorative and sustaining benefits of professional solidarity are achieved through collective inquiry and reflection on their practice (cf. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), wherein educators connect through shared interest and inquiry into a topic. For others, it may be a collegial community focused around a common goal of writing or knowledge production (cf. Burns et al., 2018), or through close study and shared practice with emergent tools for digitally mediated collaboration (Husbye et al., 2019). In all these cases, educators are embracing new tools for inquiry and practices of communication in ways that extend a professional praxis beyond their classrooms and home institutions. Moreover, these practices engender an understanding of human interdependence in the pursuits of cultural change and professional wellness.

In other cases, professional solidarity may surface through shared, professional practices that embrace arts-based learning and other aesthetic experiences that step beyond print-only forms of communication. Research has long illustrated the benefits of arts-based learning for students both within the arts and across disciplines (c.f. DeHart, 2022; Marco & Zoss, 2019; Posner & Patoine, 2009; Pruitt et al., 2014). DeHart (2022), in particular, used visual and poetic arts to invite students into a multimodal inquiry around their learning and identities. Through composing comics and collage, students juxtaposed images with words to support deeper engagement with stereotypes presented in the fiction read for the course as well as stereotypes circulating in their daily lives.

Amply documented, yet less well known, are the many benefits of creative inquiry and arts-based learning for educators (Mackenzie, 2010; McCay & Gibbs, 2020; Sappa & Barabasch, 2020). McKay and Barton (2018), in particular, found that arts-based reflection for teachers in the form of rip collage and metaphoric writing promoted teacher resilience and well-being. As for remote teaching in particular, one group of educators employed walking-based methodologies paired with photo journaling and poetry writing to foster a restorative balance between teaching, parenting, and domestic work patterns during pandemic teaching (Sullivan et al., in press)

Considered together, both collective inquiry and the aesthetic experience of arts-based learning forge new spaces for creative collaboration within classrooms and among colleagues. These creative and collaborative experiences invite students and educators to redefine the cultures of their personal and work lives in ways that promote both professional solidarity and restorative practice. In the narrative to follow, we illustrate the creative collaboration of three educators.

Forging Pathways for Creative Collaboration

Before showcasing the creative collaborations fashioned by the authors and their students, it is important to briefly set the stage for how their professional paths came to cross. Candance and Steve met in-person at the 2019 annual meeting for their professional organization, National Council Teachers of English (NCTE). Sharing common interests in arts-based learning, technology integration, and the growing climate crisis, the two proposed a shared conference presentation for the fall of 2020 focusing on these three topics. Weeks after submitting their presentation proposal, schools across the globe shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing all three authors into remote teaching and learning circumstances that would shape their professions for years to come.

All three educators were required to teach from their homes through web-based video conferencing and online learning management systems such as Google Classroom and Canvas. For Candance and Steve, teacher educators at mid-sized universities in the American Midwest and South respectively, this meant moving in-person classes and supervising teacher field experiences online. For Teresa, teaching high school English in the American Southwest, this meant transitioning to a digital classroom.

Previous to remote teaching and learning, all three educators had been well versed in using online platforms for teaching and learning. With 60+ years of experience combined, they understood the need to create meaningful relationships with students, between students, and between students and ideas. Yet, previous to remote teaching and learning, the online space had always been an auxiliary space for deeper engagement and expanded access to learning, never a replacement for in-person learning. After an initial pivot for students and teachers, they settled into more consistent routines and began to consider how to reintegrate student-directed learning into their digital classrooms. Although a new normal of teaching and learning emerged, something critical to their professional practice was still missing. While they showed up daily for their students both online and in video calls, they felt isolated as professionals. Several questions of doubt arose: *Is this the best approach to teaching online? Are our students forming connections? Is there a better platform that I could use to deliver this content? Will students turn on their cameras? How long can I sustain this mode of teaching?*

For Candance and Steve, who were accepted to present at NCTE's national conference, which had now moved completely online, they had to rethink how they would engage their professional peers in a video, on-demand format. Instead of creating a didactic video presentation about poetry and climate change that might position their colleagues as passive recipients of information, they decided to create a video prompt that would invite their colleagues into an active, poetic inquiry. Similar to the "poetic encounters" designed by DeHart (2022, p. 129), which invited students to intentionally juxtapose images with words, the video prompt asked participants to compose a selfie-collage of themselves in relation to their local

outdoor settings. Through playful combining of self-portraits, images, and words, participants were prompted to artfully reflect on their relationships with the environment.

Drawing upon the collaborative potentials of shared composing spaces such as Padlet, Zoom, and Jamboard, Candance and Steve crafted a video writing prompt, combining selfie-inspired visual collage and poetry writing on issues related to the environment. Modeling this process of poetic inquiry, they composed their own selfie-collage poems and workshopped them online prior to creating their video writing prompt. See Figures 1 and 2.



Fig. 1: The Hawthorn has fallen.

In sum, Candance and Steve's NCTE 2020 presentation focused on humankind's desire to make its presence known in time and space by placing itself in stories such as cave drawings, painted portraits, or murals. To do this, they focused on the genres of poetry, selfie photography, and collage as a means for individuals to place themselves "in relation" to the settings that surround them and that underscore their narratives of habitat and Earth. After sharing their own selfie-collages, Candance and Steve invited their professional peers to likewise engage in narrating themselves, providing the following prompts and examples. See Table 1.

In short, Teresa was drawn to Candance and Steve's investment in teaching through multimodalities and their recognition of the insights that students can glean when the traditional parameters of text and storytelling are disrupted and reimagined. Shortly after the conference, Teresa reached out to Candance and Steve via email, asking if she could have access to the video prompt so that she could incorporate something similar into her own classroom. Candance and Steve immediately agreed and encouraged her to keep in touch and share the process.

Forging Forward Through Bringing it Back

Energized by the creative collaborations with colleagues online, the authors circled back to the idea of selfie-collage, thinking through how best to incorporate the creative composition into their classrooms and invite their students to partner with multimodality alongside their instructors.

Collaging Literacy Identity. Building on the creative boost experienced through creating their own selfie-collages alongside colleagues, Candance and Steve posed the invitation for selfie-collage to their own students and asked their students who were preparing to be English teachers to explore their relationships with books, reading, and writing through selfie-collage as a way to connect with young writers they were working with online. In an effort to manage space and focus, this article will only briefly describe Candance's implementation of selfie-collage with her students, in order to more fully illustrate the creative pathways that Teresa and her high school seniors traveled through collage.

For Candance, at her midwestern University, selfie-collage emerged as a way for teacher candidates, early in their preparation to become English teachers, to create a selfie-collage exploring their relationship to texts print-based and beyond. These selfie-collages would be used not only to introduce themselves to their classmates in their online course but also to introduce themselves to the middle school and high school writers that they would be working with as writing coaches.

Drawing upon Greene's (1995) call to awaken the imagination through creative aesthetic engagement and Prasad and The Lions BEd Group's (2021) use of collage for examining emerging professional identities, Candance hoped the multimodal invitation would create a new space for sharing personal perspectives as well as spur productive risk taking and discovery in online spaces. See Table 2.

Table 2

Selfie-Mash-Ups of Literacy Identity—Assignment Prompt

Using Canva or Jamboard, compose a collage representing your literacy identity. This collage will be read/viewed by the student writers we work with this semester and their teachers. The collage should include images, doodles, quotes, etc., to depict aspects of your literacy identity. Questions to consider in your selfie-collage:

- What experiences do you have with reading and writing, online and off?
- What experiences do you have reading, writing, and helping other writers?
- What details do you want writers to know about yourself?
- Consider including a picture or selfie of yourself alongside your defining texts.

In this case, the selfie-collage was an invitation to the students to explore their own literacy narratives with their professional peers and begin positioning themselves as professionals in the field of education. The following prompt was provided to the undergraduate students.

Collaging Relationships to the Environment. For Teresa at Arizona School for the Arts, where she teaches a required yearlong course to seniors, the selfie-collage project, along with other multimodal projects, eventually replaced a traditional academic research paper. Driven by her desire for students to primarily engage in authentic, project-based learning that appeals to both their artistic sensibilities as well as their intellectual drive, Teresa has been increasingly offering an array of linear, as well as nonlinear, text driven experiences. Sparked by ongoing professional development and research, classroom experiences, and Candance and Steve's selfie-collage presentation, the evolution in Teresa's approach quickened during the pandemic and has since continued. For instance, as students read historical fiction and then wrote historical short stories, she encouraged them to add hyperlinks to period-specific music and artworks to enhance their story arcs. By strategically adjusting curricular activities, Teresa encouraged students to disrupt the disconnected nature of their online learning experience and form connections between the various elements of assignments including language, artforms, history, and culture—human artifacts that transcend space and time. Teresa continues to reshape assignments as she strives for students to integrate meaningful multimodal information and artforms into their work.

Needless to say, the students' response to the task of creating a poetry collage exceeded Teresa's expectations. Upon receiving the invitation to compose in this manner, students immediately began scrolling through their phones and strategically planning layouts of pictures and text. By transforming the idea of linear text into a dynamic interplay of images and language, the students were able to root their learning in a multimodal narrative of identity and reflection.

In reflecting on the experience herself, Teresa credits both collective inquiry and arts-based learning for re-engaging her students in the online learning space of remote teaching and learning.

I'm really amazed and very proud of what they [my students] achieved. I'm glad that I was able to take Candance and Steve's ideas and adapt them to my students' curricular needs: without a doubt, Candance and Steve's work was the catalyst for deepening my students' motivation and learning experiences. As students exceeded every expectation of what I thought they'd do, I knew I was on the right path in terms of elevating multimodal text in the classroom. My experience with Candance and Steve also reinforced my commitment to interacting with other educators in ways that benefitted both my students and my professional development and instincts. (personal communication, August 2021)

In the example poetry collages featured below, Teresa's high school students illustrate an embracing of multiliteracies and non-mono-print literacies. In so doing, students had a variety of options for conveying their ideas and could align modalities to enhance meaning. See Figure 3.

Table 3

Assignment Prompt for Second Rendition of Poetry Collage for High School Seniors at Arizona School for the Arts

1. Consider your relationship to the environment. What is your positionality to it?
2. Gather photos (i.e., selfies, new or old photos of yourself (which may include other people), Google images/photos, designs, original artwork) that speak to your relationship to the environment and arrange them in a manner that helps illustrate this relationship.
3. Include two or more of the following (through hyperlinks) that also help express this relationship—a published poem, a song, a dance piece, visual artwork, etc.
4. Add an original poem that aligns with your collage and is a response to the prompt.
5. Arrange your collage.



Fig. 4: Trapped in a concrete cage by student B.

In Figure 4, Student B created a physical collage, rather than a digital one, and included flower petals and cut paper. In addition, they added hyperlinks to the pink- and blue-shaded boxes. These hyperlinks anchor to visuals rather than words and lead the viewer to different online sonic experiences including the sound of falling rain. Other students' hyperlinks accessed art songs, poems, TikTok, and visuals. See Figure 4.



Fig. 5: Capturing the essence of nature and myself in each frame by student C.

Ongoing Creative Inquiry for Professional Growth

In reflecting on our different iterations of digital poetry and selfie-collage that emerged over the past two years in both online and in-person settings, all three authors have been prompted to rethink their understandings of “texts” and how they circulate online. They have also been prompted to reflect on the collective and creative dimensions of literacy learning as it happens in and across learning communities. Indeed, poetry collage opens spaces for students to insert themselves into conversations happening online and off, drawing upon the multimodality of cultural resources they see as most important. This process also invited the three educators into a continual disruption of their own personal “best practices.” Similar to Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2012) claim that creative solidarity allows for a “rearrange[ment] of symbolic content and human exchanges” (p. 56), multimodal expression allowed their students to see themselves as creative agents within the online learning space.

What had worked prior to obligatory, remote learning was not sufficient for the teaching conditions that limited student and teacher interactions to grid and chat conversation. These constraints hindered the restorative potentials of community-based learning, prompting the authors to reinvent understandings of student engagement, creative collaboration, and the importance of community for teaching writing online. Furthermore, the constraints pushed the authors to lean into their professional networks for support and inspiration to move through and across barriers to professional growth. Teresa asserts this push and lean below.

My strong beliefs about the need for students to be well-versed in reading and writing across modalities and genres has led to my adapting other ideas the three of us have shared during our numerous conversations. I'm indebted to their generosity of spirit and the collegial home I have found with them. (personal communication, March 2022)

Through the creative composing and sharing of poetry collage, the educators connected more deeply with their own relations to the concepts collaged, while also interweaving themselves with professional peers who were also in need of professional dialogue and creative solidarity through poetic modes of expression.

As professional development opportunities continue to migrate to online, hybrid spaces, leaders within the education profession must ask how collective inquiry and arts-based practices serve to build restorative relations in new professional spaces for both teachers and students. How do such practices invite the imagination while also positioning educators as active agents in their professional growth? For the authors, the professional relations established through creative practice not only enriched their connections to each other and issues of environmental crisis, but also built collegial relationships that continue to push the boundaries of what constitutes effective learning spaces. These questions underscore the need for professional spaces where educators can inspire one another and transform students' learning.

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Candance Doerr-Stevens is Associate Professor of reading at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where she teaches courses on digital and disciplinary literacies. She received a PhD in critical literacy and English education from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Before graduate studies, Candance taught middle and high school English. She is most energized by her work with teachers, especially in her current role as Director of the UWM Writing Project. Her research focuses on the literacy practices and civic expression involved in multimodal composition. Her work has been published in *Pedagogies*, *English Journal*, and *English Teaching Practice and Critique*.



Teresa Layden is the 12th-grade English teacher at Arizona School for the Arts, a college-prep performing arts school, in Phoenix, Arizona. She earned an M.A. in English from Georgetown University and an M.A. in American Literature from George Washington University. In addition to teaching for over 20 years, she is on the editorial review board of the *Arizona English Journal* and a published poet.



Stephen Goss is an Assistant Professor of English and English Education at Kennesaw State University, outside of Atlanta, Georgia. He has taught English Language Arts in a variety of settings including rural, urban and suburban public schools, and most recently taught 7th and 8th grade in a large Northeastern School District. He works to help students develop ideas and publish their writing digitally, and via small and large public art installations. Through these installations, physical spaces in and around schools are often reimagined, repurposed, and/or disrupted. His research focuses on art integration, teacher stance, and student publication.

