Art-Making as Self-Care in Studio Practice and in the Art Classroom

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ARTMAKING AS SELF-CARE IN STUDIO PRACTICE AND IN THE ART CLASSROOM

by

SHAUNA ANN DELONG

Under the Direction of Melanie Davenport, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this thesis project, I examine the importance of artmaking is researched, as explored personally and applied in the classroom in order to further understand implications of art-making and its’ effect on emotional well-being. This thesis references studies and articles supporting art-making as a method of alleviating negative emotions, as a practice in mindfulness, and as a form of knowing. Art-making holds potential for creativity and self-expression. The benefits of art-making as a means to reconcile various emotional challenges or traumatic life events is both documented through research and experienced personally. In applying these concepts, I learned how I could provide opportunity for my students experiencing their own life challenges to explore a similar means of expression through visual art and the practice of making.

INDEX WORDS: Self-care, Emotions, Catharsis, Mindfulness, Trauma, Art-making
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May 2020
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my son, who I hope to one day read his thesis; my mother, Lori Gough; and my grandmother, Margery Gough; and to all of the art teachers out there fighting the good fight who are underappreciated, underpaid, stressed-out, but continue to push students towards becoming their better selves through their own personal art-making.
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Biography and Interest in Study

When I decided to be an art teacher, I wanted it because my mom was the best human I knew. My mom, with two kids and a drug addicted and abusive husband started going back to school when I was nine. I remember her crying over algebra and being really excited about her art classes. Sometimes, I was able to tag along to draw a still-life, tie-dye fabric or even raku firing some pottery. I think I knew it then, I wanted to be just like her.

I am in my sixth year of teaching in Atlanta Public Schools. Each year I feel myself shift my perspective of what matters in art education. My high school art teacher was a DBAE trained teacher, with equal time given to the facets of that philosophy. During my college program as well, skills were taught and knowledge assessed, but personal reflection was not part of that process. Therefore, my positionality as a teacher was originally technique and content heavy, not concept driven. Until recently, these motivations of art awareness, knowledge, and skill were the paramount focus of curriculum in my classroom. Adapting to needs of an urban environment, desiring an impactful positive atmosphere for my students, I began to look at the deeper possibilities’ art could provide to my population.

Teaching in the same Title 1 School with many at risk students for five years now has provided a different perspective in what matters to me in art education. By assigning projects that build skills, art awareness and a knowledge base, and incorporating projects that focus on self-identity, awareness and expression, the art curriculum can be one of personal connection based on the experiences of the individual.

In my educational practice, I construct units that not only provide the opportunity for students to learn technique and content, but also a space to make their own sense of meaning through self-exploration and documentation of their own personal experiences. It is within my...
practice as an educator to require journaling and content based on personal experience. When students propel the learning based on their own interests, they become more connected to the learning and achieve a deeper understanding of themselves and their capacity for self-expression. Coupling meaning making with technique is a standard unit for one of my classes. Therefore, I must ask myself how I make meaning in my own artmaking.

Through this studio thesis, I will research and investigate my own experience and construct knowledge based on my own personal lived experiences. I am interested in working in two dimensional paintings as well as dabble in some non-traditional canvases and possibly some three-dimensional representation as well as photography. I typically work in watercolor or oil and incorporate symbolism into my images, as I do with classroom assignments as well. Sullivan (2006) writes that, “research is a transformative act that has an impact on the researcher and the researched” (p. 22). Sullivan then describes that, “the role of lived experience, subjectivity, and memory are seen as knowledge construction and strategies such as self-study, collaborations, and textual critiques are used to reveal important insights unable to be uncovered by more traditional research methods” (p. 24). This approach will inform my exploration of self-identify and self-care as an artist. I will return to the theme of self-care in Chapter 5.

1.2 Need for the Study

Over the past two years, I have endured chronic trauma and anxiety surrounding my son’s multiple suicidal actions, inpatient hospitalizations, and rehabilitation. While working full time and in graduate classes, I rarely had time to reflect on the effects the events had on me. Over the past two years, he enacted five suicidal gestures, resulting in three inpatient hospitalizations and two rehabilitation programs. Now that he is back home and we both are receiving the care we need, I have room and necessity to self-reflect, self-explore, and open up pathways of searching that I have previously been uncharted. Given his obsession with dying, I
was confronted with the reality of making meaning of myself in the absence of him. Who am I? Where do I stand as myself, not just his mother? A sense of resilience and strength emerged from the seemingly endless chaos, and I underwent a great deal of trauma. Throughout the program at GSU, I was afforded permission and opportunity to explore the complexities of my situation through my own art-making. Not only was I able to do so, but it was mandated that I carve out time to process, create, and reflect through my coursework.

As educators, our resources are often exhausted when we reach home. We undergo a great deal of secondary trauma as stewards of care for a number of students who are receiving little care at home or who have been through awful and traumatic events themselves. Three years ago, I attended a student’s funeral who was murdered. I have experienced many students leaving school only to end up in prison for violent crimes. Over the seven years in Atlanta, I have had several students who were the ones who discovered their dead mother, sister or father. Many of my students experience abuse, neglect, and are in debilitating poverty. As a caring human, these devastating circumstances endured by my students leave an indelible impression in my psyche as well. Through the external motivations of succeeding in graduate school, I found the energy to explore art-making and start the healing process of reflection, coupled with therapy, journaling and designated time for self-care.

In addition to these stressors, I must navigate life’s day to day difficulties. I was recently in a car crash that did not result in lasting physical harm other than a scar on my wrist. I am processing acceptance of the event with underlying anxieties that I hope to expel into artworks that embody them in a physical and visual way. Merriam-Webster (“Trauma”, 2019) defines trauma as, “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.” Trauma can be broadly applied to many upsetting scenarios that produce long-term emotional stress. Artmaking has the capacity not only to alleviate negative
emotions caused by traumatic events, but provides a method of channeling these negative emotions into a positive outlet of creation, self-expression and catharsis. When art-making, sometimes I have a direction, sometimes it’s more haphazard. Both methods help alleviate emotional stress and pain. I become unencumbered and imaginative of possibilities rather than stifled by life’s events.

In describing art’s ability to connect others to this power of a creative outlet while reflecting on traumatic events, Bennett (2005) states,

Manifesting trauma not simply as an interior condition but as a transformative process that impacts (on) the world as much as (on) bodies. Trauma in this sense, is conceptualized as having a presence, a force. Thus, I argue that visual art presents trauma as a political rather than subjective phenomenon. It does not offer us a privileged view of the inner subject; rather, by giving trauma extension in space or lived place, it invites an awareness of different modes of inhabitation. (p.12)

Through this perspective, Bennett illustrates the essence of experiencing art in a visceral substantive way due to the physical space it inhabits and the connection one feels to the work.

The school where I teach is currently pursuing the process of becoming a Trauma Informed School. A trauma informed school is considered an environment where faculty and staff are responsive and cognizant of students who may be experiencing traumatic stresses. Training is provided to guide staff in de-escalation and appropriately responding when conflict is present. In addition to staff training, students are supplied with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations.

Being a trauma informed school means that teachers are understood to be affected by secondary trauma stress, or STS. STS is “the emotional duress that results when an individual
hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another” (NCTSN, n.d.) STS emerges when teachers, counselors, and administrators experience repeated exposure to students who undergo trauma. Lander (2018) writes that “it is now understood that working with people in trauma hearing their stories of hardship and supporting their recovery has far-reaching emotional effect on the provider” (para. 3). Through becoming trauma informed, my school is hoping to be better equipped at handling and coping with defiance and disrespect in order to dive deeper into the root cause of the transgression. Using this approach, staff is more equipped to gain understanding of the student, and it enables the student to see their own motivations for their behavior, thereby instilling emotional awareness in the student. A trauma informed school helps facilitate a culture of empathy and support among staff and students.

I have personally used this de-escalation tactic and witnessed its effects. A student was placed in my room by an administrator after she had gotten into a fight in the cafeteria. Because I did not admonish her but asked her relevant questions and shared a personal story, I gained her trust. She divulged to me that she had found her mother strangled in the bathroom when she was 11 years old, in the sixth grade. With my heart on the floor, I told her to please come to my art sessions after school where students who face death of a loved-one come to create art projects centered around emotion and trauma.

1.3 Visual Timelines

My mother is an art teacher of 26 years. Five years ago, she experienced the death of her boyfriend. In dealing with grief she attended some art therapy sessions. In one of them she constructed a visual timeline (Fig 1.1). This visual timeline represents her childhood, her abusive marriage, raising children, divorcing my dad, finding her true love, and losing him. Her timeline session resonated with me as a meaningful way to express my own story, as well as an
opportunity offer the same method of expression to my students as a way to process their own emotions, life events, and even trauma.

I constructed my own (Fig. 1.2) timeline that illustrates the nature of growing up in that abusive household. The two dotted lines represent myself and my sister. She becomes suspended halfway through the journey and I continue into motherhood, experience my own abusive relationships, but find my way out of them. Following those events is the representation of the suicidal actions my son orchestrated. These actions and repercussions occurred over the course of two years. Those events are represented in the large purple star towards the end of the timeline. The end though is a convergence, things falling in place and continuing on a course towards recovery and ends in the present moment of my son receiving care for his psychiatric needs, being in school working towards a goal, stability at my work, buying a house within my budget and on my own which will be a good investment.

Acknowledging the negatives and positives of my life ends with a feeling of resurgence, a feeling of balance, and thankfulness for all of the good. Seeing a version of your life in front of you represented by your choices alongside many others, exemplifies the narrative, embodies a story, and produces not only a catharsis but a different perspective of the visual events on the paper.

Figure 1.1 “Timeline” by Lori Gough 2017
Living mindfully in the present moment results in positive emotions. Perhaps the act of painting forces the participant to accept past events and participate in the present moment without judgement (Dijk, p.17). After completing my own timeline, I decided to facilitate a session after school with some of my students, as well as a trauma group that meets at my school.

1.3.1 Visual Timelines: Group Work Implementation

As I had worked through my own trauma, I was able to try out the visual timeline activity with my students and friends, which contributed to the direction of this thesis. The student timelines were my first attempt to promote mindfulness and emotional awareness through art-making. The student groups were from my class and from a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder grief group that met on campus. Students participating in this group had lost a family member learning mindfulness and coping strategies.

For the first session, I had 12 students, the PTSD trauma group. I discussed the timeline objective, informing students that their process, outcome, and experience is unique. I review representational versus the abstract and nonobjective. I informed them that the timeline has no parameters. It could be a timeline of their future, or today. I discuss the events unfolded in a sample timeline on the smartboard and the major events depicted on it: childhood, motherhood, an abusive marriage, the freedom of a divorce (illustrated with wings), a feather to represent the death of a loved one. I then tell the students this is my mother’s timeline.

The next timeline I discuss is my own: childhood growing up in the abusive environment, subsequent relationships seeking the same familiarity, the birth of my son, the struggle of dealing
with his suicide attempts over the past year, and the underlying backbone of my story, my mother.

The students then create their own versions of a timeline. Some are abstract, some are representational, some just colors and shapes. According to Franklin (2017), “As embodied consciousness we are literally creation knowingly contemplating itself, and art becomes the embodiment of that quintessence.” (Franklin, p.5) I hope that is the experience of all of the participants, that the act of creating is also the act of questioning and discovery.

1.3.2 Visual Timelines: Outcomes

I felt it was a particularly compelling project with PTSD and trauma group. I had not met many of these students before. They were not all art students but gathered from the general population of the school. The students shared their story without coaxing or prodding, yet they presented an interesting challenge because I did not know these students and had not built any relationship with them prior to the art session. Part of my philosophy in education centers around my approachability; I feel that the foundations of my students’ success is intricately bound to the rapport and relationship I foster with them. Projects of this nature reflect this philosophy, encouraging openness and connection. Perhaps the content of self-expression can be successful because it originates from the individual rather than a set of expectations, or benchmarks of learning.

Figure 1.3 Group of Visual Timelines
Sheri Van Dijk (2006), a noted social worker and psychotherapist, states that living in the present moment will alleviate emotional pain. Worrying about the future can produce anxiety and stress or dwelling in past painful experiences can recreate that emotional pain, such as hurt and sadness, but mindfully acknowledging our emotions might make them less overwhelming (Scarlet, 2007). When students are painting the events of their life, they have the opportunity to experience the emotions of once painful event, but acknowledge them in a different way. They are channeling past painful events into abstract or symbolic colorful artwork. By acknowledging their own personal experiences and emotions through painting, students give these emotions voice and substantiate them as truth. This truth is a form of acknowledgement.

1.3.3 Visual Timeline Outcomes: Self-Expression

The need for self-expression is further validated by Dr. Malchiodi, an art therapist and trainer in her field. In working with children who have experienced trauma, she states,

I learned how the impact of trauma can be expressed through art, and, for many children who have been abused, or are witness to violence, I learned that art is one of the only ways to communicate their experiences and crises. (1998, p.98)

Not only does the visual representation help children deal with the many emotions involved in traumatic events, but it is helpful in my personal studio practice to keep this in mind. The first session was a successful experience where students were able to participate in art-making and experience.

1.3.4 Visual Timeline Outcomes: Reflection and Response

The next session, I had students reflect upon and summarize their choices and process, with included meanings of symbols, colors, etc. Students revealed details of their lives, expressed emotions, comforted each other, and truly demonstrated empathy. I consulted with the social worker about many of the stories. I have so many conflicting feelings about this project
now. While I recognize the need for this release and this processing time, I am apprehensive about orchestrating it. I feel as though I am in way over my head, with no training in therapy. I am not certified, licensed or even savvy with what to say or how to respond. But, after conducting the first project with the Victims to Victors group, the coordinator for the group received the following email:

Hey ladies,

Ms. Muhammad heard about the art session and was thoroughly impressed. She wanted to implement additional art for the remainder of the classes. We will have two artist – Erin and Asante from the organization Chopart coming to day to start a project with the kids. Today will just be a rapport building session, nothing extreme but just a way for the kids to get to know them and talk about the project, do a bit of sketching. This organization helps homeless youth/teens through their trauma through art therapy. I know this is last minute, but Ms. Muhammad was just so excited and inspired by the concept. (Edmonds, A.)

I am excited about the positive impact my involvement has made on the group. It is a fitting tie-in to the content covered throughout the 14-week session of the PTSD coping group. While conferencing with the counselor leading the group, she disclosed that they are looking at providing art therapy and art projects embedded in next year’s program, offered by certified art therapist. The resulting impact of only one session has created a ripple effect of including art as a means of expression and catharsis. I am happy that this opportunity will hopefully be provided and relieved that it will be by a trained professional art therapist.

With my own art club students, too, I noticed an increased involvement, empathy, and reflection. Ordinarily art club is a social after school activity. With the implementation of the
timeline project, the students were able to connect on a deeper level. While presenting their work and listening to others, they were supportive of each other. Afterwards, they showed this support with hugs and affirmations to sobbing participants. The effects of doing these visual timeline sessions were substantial, even more than I was prepared to encounter and process. I am comforted by the amount of support there is for artistic expression, especially in processing difficult emotions. According to Dr. Scarlet (2017), an effort to “reduce any emotionally painful experience is called experiential avoidance. Giving into experiential avoidance can lead to negative reinforcement” (p.28). By bringing the painful events front and center, the participant practices acceptance. Acceptance can lead to feelings of calmness and peace. The remedy for avoidance is alleviation.

This theory of alleviation and mindfulness reminds me of my yoga practice. In yoga, the instructor constantly reminds us to stay in the present moment. Notice your breath. Notice your mind, empty your thoughts to stay in the present moment. The notion that the present moment offers refuge and stasis exists in many Eastern philosophies such as Taoism, Buddhism, as well as yoga and meditation. Visual meditation practices of calming the mind are often seen employed in adult coloring books, mandalas, and rock gardens. These timelines-- my mother’s, my own, and my students’-- convinced me of the need to utilize my artmaking for self-healing. In the next section, I outline my proposal for this studio thesis in which I attempt to do just that.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

When I began this research, I was in the process creating paintings that were reflective of my recent circumstances. My art inquiry stems from a need to filter through experience, grasp at particles of meaning, and glue those particles together to reflect back at me a mirror that pieces together the reality of my interpretation and process the events in my life.
The first painting depicts myself as a mother grappling with my son’s unknown future. The other painting represents my favorite means of learning, my travel. I started traveling alone last summer following the first three instances of my son’s suicidal actions, I decided to journey through Europe for six weeks, backpacking and staying in hostels across the continent. By traveling alone, I expose myself to the journey wholly without distraction of another person. This transformational learning has become part of my soul searching and meaning making. I seek to understand the world by experiencing it. My paintings represent my experience of seeking to understand the world. Eisner (2002) stated that, in this sense, the arts, in all their manifestations are close in attitude to play. Constraints on the imagination are loosened.

Focusing on my own art-making for this research project was necessary to better understand how meaning-making occurs, how art making contributes to self-care, and how I might support future students through the assignments I give. In the next chapter I will further examine the concepts of self-care, art-making as meaning making and inquiry, and visual communication through self-expression.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review I will discuss art for self-care and research surrounding the concept of art-making as alleviation from various inhibitors such as stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma. I will discuss artists with whom I feel commonality exists in either style or theme. Finally, I will present artists who have influenced me and my current state of artistic interests and exploration.
2.1 Transformation and Spirituality through Art Education

I propose that not only is art-making a means of transformational learning, but that it is a means of spiritual connection to the self. In addition to these learning theories, I reference Multiple Intelligence Theory. All of these theories provide a framework to build understanding of what transpires in the art classroom, and a lens with which to view the development and holistic approach to learning that art education can provide. Creative endeavors and self-expression are difficult to quantify, but I reference several studies and experiences that support not only application of these theories, but art-making’s capacity for aiding self-care via self-expression.

Transformative learning is a process that involves constructing new learning through the reinterpretation of experiences and beliefs. It includes changes in personal perspective and making new meaning out of previous individual and collective experiences. In transformative learning, one experiences an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one’s beliefs and personal assumptions. This type of learning invites the creation of new attitudes and can even alter one’s worldview. Transformative learning involves altering one’s perceptions of absolutes to include differing perspectives, changing the ego, or conscious thought. The inclusion of new ideas or perspectives into an already present schema is part of the transformational process - new information is fused with old.

Transformation can be at the individual level, or communal level. It encompasses the act of making meaning out of one’s experiences. It involves learning “how to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow and Associates, p. 2000, p. 8). Art education is a means to explore transformative learning and deeper connection to the self and to others. Because artistic expression exists within a realm of multifaceted, subjective, and unlimited perspectives; where relationships occur
between creator and creation, as well as creation and observer, these perspectives inherently hold different truths. When a change in perspective alters one’s perception, then transformational learning can take place.

In addition to transformative learning, spiritual learning is another way of knowing that is newer to the discussion in education. There are many articles and definitions attempting to explain spirituality. In a general sense, spirituality constitutes a journey towards wholeness, connectedness, and seeks to connect an individual to a wider framework of meaning and to view oneself as a part of some larger whole. Carr (1995) describes spirituality as:

The spiritual identity of a person, then, is determined by reference to his thoughts, beliefs, feeling and goals and it is liable for evaluation in essentially normative terms—in terms, precisely, of its aspirations to what is true or false, right or wrong, good or bad. A healthy soul, then, is precisely one which aspires to the state of what is divine or other-worldly; it is orientated to the transcendent condition of all that is eternal rather than temporal, immortal rather than mortal, invisible rather than visible, intelligible rather than sensible. (p. 87)

Howard Gardner is an educational theorist who further validates art education’s necessity. According to Gardner, there exists multiple intelligences. Art education taps into several ways of knowing. Gardner (1999) viewed spiritual intelligence as: the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting. It seems more responsible to carve out that area of spirituality closest ‘in spirit’ to the other intelligences and then, in the sympathetic manner applied to naturalist intelligence, ascertain how this candidate intelligence fares. In doing so, I think it best to put aside the term spiritual, with its manifest and problematic connotations, and to speak
instead of an intelligence that explores the nature of existence in its multifarious guises.

Thus, an explicit concern with spiritual or religious matters would be one variety – often the most important variety – of an existential intelligence. (p. 59)

Through this quote, Gardner addresses the difficulties in defining spirituality, as well as applying the term to learning. He describes spiritual intelligence as existential intelligence, which better relates to a search for meaning through a studio-based art-making practice. In addition to spiritual intelligence, art-making utilizes spatial-visual, kinesthetic, linguistic, inter and intrapersonal intelligences. Transformational and spiritual learning take place in a studio practice, but the other domains of learning are equally engaged in the art classroom through the various lessons and assignments in art criticism, research, art-making and reflecting on process.

The study of art from various cultures, as well as art creation, provides opportunities to investigate the meaning of existence. Perhaps the term existential learning better describes the nature of inquiry that encompasses questioning one’s purpose and search for meaning. A studio-based practice accommodates the search for meaning as well as space for reflection. How could this concept of meaning making be tied to views of the self? In Giving an Account of Oneself, Butler (2005) states:

Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. (p.136)

Through painting my own life experiences, I am able to exist in that human space of risk, inquiry, and reflection.

Eisner (1994) states that there are critical times in human development that require stimulation and nurturing of sensory capacities so that the qualitative environment can be
experienced (p.153). By exploring art media while basing the concept around self-identities and feelings, the art experience becomes a personal connection. Lowenfield (1950) states this concept best, “Since it is generally accepted that progress, success, and happiness in life depend greatly upon the ability to adjust to new situations, the importance of art education for personal growth and development can easily be recognized” (p.v). Applying this notion of art education to myself, I am validated in my own personal growth by delving into emotional awareness and personal experiences.

Noted neurologist Antonio R. Damasio claims that, “consciousness is based on a representation of the body and how it changes when reacting to certain stimuli. Self-image would be unthinkable without this representation” (Lenzen, 2005, p. 14). If emotions arise from physical change and feelings arise from awareness of those changes, and consciousness is rooted in this process, then creative expressions of the self will further develop one’s ability to process, engage, and respond to one’s feelings by allowing the senses to experience those emotions and evoke a catharsis of emotions. Another educational philosopher, John Dewey, relies on the tenant of experience as a way of knowing. As Dewey (1916) states, “It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation” (Dewey, p.53). Experiencing emotions while managing them through coping or catharsis is another way to learn about oneself, maintain healthy emotional outlets, and gain capacity to handle future strenuous situations.

There is extensive research on the positive effects art-making can have on one’s emotional well-being. Art-making has been linked to decreased stress and anxiety. In a 2016 study, researchers found that free-form painting, mandala coloring and modeling with clay. The study found that art-making resulted in decreased anxiety. All three of the art media equally reduced anxiety. Heart rate variability (HRV) was used as an objective indicator of anxiety,
specifically the vagal score, an indirect measure of parasympathetic nerve influence on heart rate (Sandmire, 2016). In addition to these finding, DePetrillo and Winner (2005) found that art-making improves mood. They used an Affect Grid of self-reporting to assess mood improvement of participants after they made art following negative stimuli. The art-making group showed significant positive changes in mood improvement compared to that of the control group who had to copy a line drawing puzzle instead of make art. The study demonstrates that the act of creating a work of art makes people feel more positive in their mood and, hence, elevates their measure of mood valence. They tested art majors and non-art majors separately, finding no difference in mood elevation suggesting “that the effect works equally well for those without interest or ability in art as it does for those with artistic skills” (p, 211). This study found that, “These results suggest that artmaking increases the pleasure dimension of mood and does so via either catharsis or redirection” (p. 205).

Both of these studies indicate art’s role in emotional well-being. Through working in art, participants’ mood was improved in the first study, while in the second study, participants’ physiological responses measured more favorably after an art-making session. This research helps to substantiate the position that art-making positively affects one’s self-care

2.2 Artistic Influences

When I reflect upon my own artmaking, I recognize that I am influenced by many different artists, styles, and techniques. I share commonalities with various artists in style and theme. For example, Isabel Emrich is an artist in California who paints vivid serene underwater paintings. These pieces embody personal freedom and exploration. They are skillfully crafted with attention to details in value and color changes due to light refraction of the water. I painted a similar pose underwater as part of this thesis. This artist's love of the water is a connection between us. I too experience peacefulness of floating, swimming and possess a deep desire to be
in or around the ocean. In Endure (fig 2.1), I feel she encapsulates the serenity and freedom of floating.

![Figure 2.1 “Endure” by Isabel Emrich 2019](image)

I am drawn to the themes found within Expressionism and Surrealism. Specific artists of those movements with whom I feel a connection are Frida Kahlo, Salvador Dali, and Edvard Munch. These artists’ works reflect emotional states and provide documentation of their personal experiences. In particular I appreciate Frida Kahlo’s honesty of emotion in The Broken Column (fig 2.2). The rawness of her expression and the stoic appearance of her stare allows the viewer to generate empathy of acceptance and perseverance between artist and audience. With Kahlo as
inspiration, I painted a couple of pieces where I hoped to portray the difficulties involved in maintaining mental health when faced with debilitating conditions that can threaten survival.

Figure 2.2 “The Broken Column” by Frida Kahlo 1944

Another artist who consistently uses symbolism and metaphor in his work is Salvador Dali. The Ship with Butterflies (fig 2.3) is one of his more brightly painted joyous pieces. He used butterflies in several paintings to represent psyche, or one’s soul. This piece captures my imagination because I long to be on the water, and I envision myself living on a sailboat. I painted a self-portrait that included a sailboat as representation of this desire.
Another artist I admire is Edvard Munch, who suffered from severe anxiety. His art reflects this struggle and is charged with emotions of unease and tension. In Vampire (fig 2.4), there is a somber feel to the languid pose of the woman. Even though she is a villainous vampire, she is depicted with beautifully flowing draped hair brightly colored against a muted background. The embrace is shared by both figures, and it appears as a mutual exchange of need. While Munch’s subject matter reflects his own personal struggle and journey, I include it because I identify with its expression of substantial macabre sadness. Emotional expression is something that I hope to accomplish in my own work.
Figure 2.4 “Vampire” by Edvard Munch 1916

The poster below, by Mucha (1916) illustrates the curvilinear line work of art nouveau: complexly intertangled, but graphically simple in flat color. In creating work for this thesis, I explored using movement in high contrast black and white lines undulating around symbols of metaphor to convey meaning. Linework and pattern making can be meditative. I plan to combine metaphor and this linework in a watercolor piece. The symbols will reflect my personal journey. In Mucha’s piece (fig 2.5), I find the repetition of pattern and the stylized line appealing. The elegant line work inspired one of my own pieces for this thesis.
In addition to these well-known artists, I find myself turning to my own family history for inspiration as well. My great grandmother, was a painter, as was her sister, my great aunt. They had very different styles. My great grandmother painted scenic landscapes and still lifes. My mother is also an artist. Below is a painting by my great grandmother Athalea (Jennie) Gaddy. Her use of color, shadows and highlights to convey form is applied skillfully. Her paintings are depictions of landscape scenes and still-life. Athalea’s sister Kyle painted as well, but their styles are very different. Kyle’s paintings are more abstract with bold colors while Athalea used a more subdued natural palette with neutral tones.
Figure 2.6 “Landscape” by Athalea Gaddy 1920

Figure 2.7 “Landscape” by Kyle Gaddy 1960
My grandmother painted somewhat, but never developed her skill or technique. She only completed a couple of paintings, yet she was a large influence in my life. Her landscape below is mostly larger shapes with some shading of forms. Her color use is limited.

Figure 2.8 “Landscape” by Marge Gough 1976

Figure 2.9 is a landscape by my mother, Lori Gough. Her specialty is ceramics, but she also paints. The landscape shows a sunset over the water. There is a gradient of color divided from the water by a silhouetted land mass. The colors of the sky are reflected in fragments within the water. Figure 2.10 is one of my landscapes. It shows a scene from St. Simon’s islands. The colors are more pastel and softer in value than the colors in my mom’s landscape painting, appearing almost like a watercolor painting, even though it is done in acrylic. These paintings are stylistically different, but they are thematically connected and show a range of technique across four generations of my family.
Although I doubt my female ancestors deliberately chose to utilize art for self-care, I imagine that the enjoyment of painting did contribute to their feelings of well-being. Their influence and artistic self-expression certainly helped shape my own trajectory towards
involvement in the arts. My mother’s involvement in art especially helped substantiate visual communication as a worthy pursuit. I will expand upon this in describing my own work in Chapter Four. Deliberately pursuing self-care, visual expression and communication through my artmaking provides an avenue of self-discovery and a space for existence. In the next chapter I will outline my intentions for this project and discuss the questions that guided it.
This thesis project will involve the production of a series of artworks, guided by the following questions:

1. How might the act of artmaking help me process the secondary trauma that I experience as a teacher, while navigating challenging personal experiences, impart a routine of self-care through a visual means of expression?

2. What might my studio practice reveal about art-making for self-care that could impact my approach to planning curriculum?

To answer the first question, I kept a journal, along with sketchbooks and photos documenting my process and my emotional state throughout the creation of these work by providing process photos and final pieces. To answer the second, I considered, based upon what I learn through this process, how I might engage my students in future artmaking explorations to help them create meaning from events in their lives through art.

In my own studio practice, as examined in this thesis, I looked to my personal experiences to drive the context of my paintings. In them, I hoped to invite a visual connection to the viewer, and to engage in the practice of making primarily as self-exploration and documentation. I developed technique and explored various media and processes. The purpose of this studio-based thesis was to address how an active art practice provides an arena for self-care, as well as a transformational and spiritual learning experience. Through a studio practice I addressed the need to document and process the events of my life, giving them meaning while substantiating them as a reality. This constructed documentation of my life involves the viewer who contemplates it, connecting us both in personal interpretation and constructed meaning. Art has the ability to document human experience and to connect to others across space and time. As
I reflected on these themes, I began to consider how I could apply these concepts of self-care and self-expression into the classroom.

3.1 Themes

I find that my art is more personally reflective when I use my own experiences or photographs as source material. The piece below, though 5 years old, represents my need to make sense of the journey I have traveled so far.

Growing up in a household with little to no communication of feelings at all, self-care and mental health were never discussed, and I was not aware these concepts existed until recent circumstances forced me to declare for myself a time and space to reflect and process traumatic events. The first time I went to therapy, I was 32. I had finally left an emotionally abusive relationship of ten years. My goal was simple; not to repeat the generational cycle of codependency in abusive relationships, and to gain agency over my life. I made art reflecting my experience during that relationship and the emotion of self-reliance and absolution.

I have noticed that flowing and intertwining strands of color and linework has become prevalent in my work. I realize I have created several pieces in which my hair is an integral part of the composition. After reflecting on this choice, I think this may be because I have used my hair as self-expression since I was fifteen, when dyed it burgundy for the first time. It is currently purple. I am 38 years old and have been dying and cutting my own hair for 20 years. While this is not directly shown in a painting I have produced, my hair has been a type of canvas for a long time. The act of dying and cutting it myself is cathartic and offers a sense of control and rebirth. In Finally (fig 3.1) and in Self (fig 3.2), I painted expressive flowing hair which illustrates a sense of movement and unifies the pieces thematically.
For my first painting, I wanted to portray the bond of mother and child, as well as the uncertainty of the future. Madonna and Child portraits express a serene moment of bond of attachment, protection and sacrifice of motherhood. I came across a photograph of myself at eighteen years old holding my newborn son. I used this as source material for an oil painting in which I depicted a version of him now. These became two canvas panels that read together. In renaissance art there are countless portraits of Madonna and child. I am drawn to Giovanni Battista Salvi ’s work below. Salvi was an artist during the Baroque period in Europe from early 17th century to the mid 18th century. The baroque style was ornate, extravagant and expressive.
Salvi’s painting below is stylistically and expertly crafted with the folding of the drapery in crisp dark shadows and highlights that contrast with the illuminated radiant smooth flesh skin of mother and child, giving both an angelic quality. I have always been enraptured by the skill of Renaissance artists in modeling form. I attempted to mimic the folded drapery in a blanket that is wrapped around us both.

Figure 3.3 “Madonna and Child” by Giovanni Battista Salvi 1650

Figure 3.4 Process of “Future Unknown” by Shauna DeLong 2018
Another theme present is that of freedom, self-reliance and art-making as processing emotion. Isabel Emrich expertly paints females submerged in water. According to her artist statement, she “explores the sensations of peace and calm one feels submerged in water, the dynamism of moving through water, and of the body luxuriantly enveloped in it” (Alan, Mirabelle, 2007). I have found similar freedom in water and feel a sense of connection to Emrich’s work. This painting especially reflects the sense of independence and tranquility that I would like to convey in a piece of my own using water and myself as subjects. I love being in and by the water and explore these emotions in several of my pieces for this thesis.

3.2 Subject Matter

My son suffers from depression and suicidal ideation. He is home now from a two-year ordeal of suicidal actions, threats and intensive inpatient hospitalization treatment. For periods of time throughout my enrollment at Georgia State, he would seclude himself in his room all day and was unable to hold down a job. My reaction to this situation is one of frustration, anxiety and weariness. While I am in counseling and keep an active social support network, I know that painting and art-making also help me cope with these trying circumstances. I think deeply on the trauma of the suicidal actions and the effects this ordeal has had on my well-being. In this meditation, I created a piece of art symbolizing the struggles of the past two years.

Another piece I have started but will complete as part of this thesis revolves around the search for meaning surrounding my identity as a mother and as an individual, answering the question of “Who am I”? Who am I in the absence of motherhood? Who is my son and what is his future? I will address the questions of identity in an art piece for this thesis.

I find strength and solace in traveling alone. In the summer of 2017, I traveled to six countries in Europe following another of my son’s suicidal actions. I stayed in hostels and took
trains and busses across Europe, visiting many historical places and museums I had only read about in art history books. One country that enamored me was Croatia. I had dreamed over pictures of the waterfalls of Croatia for years, never seeing myself materializing beside them. Then, I stood under the cold waterfall in Krka National forest and took countless selfies. I painted this moment of actualization and exuberance, honoring the time and place of it as a reminder of the joys life can hold. Traveling alone can bring up feelings of loneliness. I must encounter, process, and overcome this negative emotion often.

Another joy I find in life is that of water. I love traveling and I always make my way to the water. On my last solo trip last summer, I went to Puerto Rico and swam with sea turtles. I would like to incorporate this somehow into an artwork. I stepped on a sea urchin which caused severe pain and a limp for two days of the trip. I included the sea urchin as a symbol of the difficulties and pain that can arise in life. I recently crashed and totaled my car, which was another traumatic event that I needed to express and convert into a positive outlet. I am still struggling with anxiety about driving in Atlanta. One week after the crash someone crashed into the car I was borrowing from my mom. They totaled it in a hit and run. I planned to include both of these destroyed vehicles in front of a dissolving Atlanta skyline.

I have a photograph of myself underwater that I used as source material. I feel a comforting connection to water and am constantly seeking to being in and near it. To me water symbolizes freedom and triumph. I always make my way towards the ocean and feel relaxed and peaceful when I reach it.

I recently traveled alone to Puerto Rico once more to attempt surfing. I have a new respect for the water and its power. I incorporate watery images with my personal symbolism to portray a deeper meaning that is personally reflective. There is a Rumi quote that states, “what you seek is seeking you.” I am comforted by this thought that the universe is conspiring towards
our desires. Being in and around water has always been a natural fit and a comfort to me. I visually express this idea of water and connectedness to purpose in my painting.

My paintings represent my journey over the last two years. I symbolize this journey in a visual way using metaphor and symbolism. The experiences and paintings act as guidepost delineating and substantiating my existence. The paintings are a form of self-reflection and celebration of my story. As an educator and a student, I am not left much time in the day for reflection and exploration of my own art. Through this thesis, I discovered my varied perspectives and I challenged myself in new ways through my art.

3.3 Technique

My paintings are a form of self-reflection and celebration of my story. I explored new techniques and worked representationally as well as abstractly. I investigated combining the two styles in order to grow my experiences as an artist, a way to continue my path in my work. I used traditional oil paint, thinner, and mineral spirits to complete the final pieces. I prefer the slow drying time of oil to acrylics as well as the richness of the colors oil paint can provide.

One process I recently encountered involves image transfer as part of the composition. I am interested in using photo transfers in paintings as another means of visual storytelling to represent my experiences. Investigating artists who use this method informed my own art-making practice by establishing awareness and develop a deeper connection to other artists. The image transfer produces a collage effect minus the rudimentary level of technique that a collaged image can present. The image transfer is similar to a print because the ink becomes adhered to the canvas without the paper backing. I used gel medium, toner and ink jet printer to produce different effects. After rubbing off the paper backing, I painted into some of the photographs, and coated in varnish to achieve a clearer image. I incorporate this technique into two large-scale
paintings so that I could include photographs of my travels with a more painterly effect than collaging can provide.

3.4 Summary

Through this studio thesis I explored some influential experiences of my life through artistic expression. The process of painting and art-making provided an avenue of self-expression and self-care. The completion of work dedicated to my self-expression offered me insights into myself, knowledge about art-making for self-care, and skill using new media, as well as the opportunity to exercise my artistic voice. My timeline to complete these paintings was April 2020. The first two pieces were started in the summer semester of 2019. The next three were completed during the fall semester of 2019, and the second set of three paintings were completed during spring semester of 2020. I finished the series late March, 2020.
4 DOCUMENTATION OF PROCESS & REFLECTIONS

Throughout the process of creating this series of work, I kept a sketchbook and photographically documented my process. I will describe below each piece in chronological order, offering reflections on what I learned as an artist and teacher. These paintings are reflections of myself over the past three years. They represent different events and emotional states I have experienced during that time frame. The artwork serves as a method of documentation and validation of my experience and existence.

4.1 Documentation of Meditations

This first piece is watercolor and permanent marker. This was the initial project and teacher sample for a class portrait assignment involving visual metaphors and symbolism. Students created an index of symbols that could portray various meaning. My visual metaphors include a rose, a butterfly and a jellyfish. The jellyfish embodies the recent beautiful and painful events of my life, the rose represents growth and change that arises from struggle, and the butterfly symbolizes hope and transformation. I placed these symbols outside of the profile, entangled in a flow of breath from my lips because they are outcomes of life circumstances. Within my profile, I kept the imagery more abstract.
Figure 4.1 “Meditations” by Shauna DeLong 2018
Students were instructed to include at least three symbols. We went over artists such as Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso and Frida Kahlo. Students critically assessed meaning and symbolism in pieces by the artists. Then they developed their own symbols and meaning. I traced their profile using a flashlight onto a large 16” x18” watercolor paper. I have 32 students per class so this took a couple of class periods. They were working on Zentangle pattern while I worked on getting their profiles traced. This project was one of my favorite lessons for a number of reasons. The high contrast of black and white is automatically appealing. I instructed students to use limited color for emphasis. The inclusion of symbolism offers a deeper connection to the work and the abstract approach to a portrait is accessible and engaging to all of the students. I find that when my assignments offer a way to engage in self-expression connected to meaning, students are more authentically engaged. Figure 4.2 below is images of student work from this assignment.
In Student Sample A, the piece symbolizes her love for animals and nature, as well as illustrating her feelings of being in a restricted in a fishbowl. Student Sample B illustrates her feelings of being restricted and controlled as a teenager, like a marionette being pulled and prodded. She symbolized this struggle with tears. Even though her work only includes two symbols, I believe it effectively portrays her situation. After all works were hung, we had a class critique where students guessed at the deeper meaning. I had students follow the Feldman Method analyzing their favorite piece in their sketchbooks. Afterwards, we have a discussion where students described their interpretations at meaning and the artists divulged their intent and association from their symbolism. This assignment always enlightens me into understanding more about my students personally as well as connects them to each other through sharing their experiences and emotions.
4.2 Documentation of “Future Unknown”

This piece is the second one I completed during this process. I referenced it earlier in Chapter 3. I painted this in oil from a picture of me and my son. I used two panels to illustrate the division between us in recent years. I painted him facing away from the viewer because I wanted to portray the uncertainty of his future. By painting him facing away, I hoped to portray the ambiguity of his identity, and my acceptance of uncertainty of who he is becoming, or will be; whether or not he will be successful and happy, or if these recent battles will be debilitating and detrimental to his future. In the process of creating this piece I unearthed so many pictures of him as a child. It was the most difficult work to complete due to the strong emotion present. Even now as I write this reflection on the process, it is difficult. I am still processing the chronic trauma and anxiety of the past two years. This piece helped me frame the emotional turmoil I have experienced during his suicidal threats, actions, and rehabilitation.

Figure 4.3 “Future Unknown” by Shauna DeLong 2018

I attempted to apply subtle shifts in value to render form and volume similar to the Madonna and Child by Battista Salvi in Figure 3.3. I used an orange and yellow background to
contrast the blue blanket that is shrouding the figures. I left the background simple and flat in order to contrast the volume and form of the rendered figures, hopefully this choice of a simplified background emphasizes the sentiment of motherhood, bonding, and the transformation from childhood to the mysterious figure facing away from the viewer on the right.

4.3 Documentation of “Manifest Destiny”

This painting stems from a class assignment. Students were instructed to journal about their hopes, fears, desires and motivations. After journaling, we discussed symbolism and visual metaphor. Students were instructed to design a self-portrait that incorporated visual metaphors and symbolism to communicate an idea. We worked on layering contrasting colors in color pencil to create skin tones.

Figure 4.4 Student Samples of Symbolism Portraits 2018-2019
I chose watercolor for my own symbolic portrait and layered paint to create skin tones. I used symbols of a sailboat, my hair, and landscape. This painting represents my desire to travel and live on a sailboat. I placed myself in the water staring into the unknown. I used purple and blue in the water to contrast the warm skin tones of my face. I transformed my blue hair into the suspension bridge to connect the foreground and background.

Figure 4.5 Process of “Manifest Destiny” by Shauna DeLong 2019
4.4 Documentation of Endure This

The painting in Figure 19 is one that I wanted to convey feelings of both suffering and hope. The lights are emanating from the center of the face, but there is also a sense of sadness to the eyes. I used my own face as a reference, but this is one of the more abstract pieces I have done. The painting was a simple process of pulling out lights with solvent soaked paper towels and laying in color with the brush. I completed this painting in only a couple of hours. I wanted this painting to represent prominent emotions more so than planning out the composition or content and exist as an idea of a feeling rather than as a definitive portrayal of a thing or person.
The painting in Figure 4.7 is from a picture I took of myself under a waterfall in the Krka National Park in Lozovac, Croatia. The painting was a challenge in many ways. The process of building the skin tones and painting the water drops was difficult. Once I started adding more color to the waterdrops and light and dark values to the skin, the painting became more visually and personally expressive. I had been dreaming of standing in this waterfall for over a year. This moment of actualization was one that I wanted to document visually. The photograph is difficult to discern details because of the water and the darkness of the photo, but overall, I am pleased with the outcome because it offers a glimpse into a vivid emotion and a significant time of self-determinization and an exuberance that I hope is conveyed with the facial expression and the color choices.
Figure 4.8 Process of “Waterfall” by Shauna DeLong 2019
Figure 4.9 “Waterfall” by Shauna DeLong 2019
4.6 Documentation of Voyager

For this painting I use a photograph that I took of myself in a reflection of a doorway. I was on my way to the train station, heading to Nice, France from a hostel in Genoa, Italy. I was only in Genoa for two days, but I went to an interactive Van Gogh exhibit while there, and I stayed in a hostel that was an old school building. I feel this photograph captures the essence of the six weeks of solo travel; hostel to train, train to bus, bus to hostel, and so on across six countries in six weeks.

Figure 4.10 Process of “Voyager” by Shauna DeLong 2019

Voyager (fig 4.10) is the first painting I did with photo transfer technique. I printed out photographs I took while on the trip, both laser and toner printers. The type of printer produced different effects. The toner images are more subtle and faded. The ink jet ones are crisp and detailed. I printed the image in reverse so that they would transfer as the original. I used a soft matte gel medium on the front of the photo and placed them image side down onto the canvas. Peeling the paper off was a laborious process, but I am pleased with the results. I then coated parts of the photos in varnish in order to produce a clearer image and I painted onto some of them as well.
This is the largest painting I produced for this thesis and constructing the frame was a challenge. I had to stretch it twice because it was too large without bracers. The frame became warped after stretching, so I took everything apart and attached bracers to the corners which helped keep the canvas structurally secure and flat.

Figure 4.11 “Voyager” by Shauna DeLong 2019
4.7 Documentation of Orchid

For this painting I used a photograph from a profile view of my face. Initially, I wanted this painting to represent pain and solitude. During the time that I was working on this painting, my grandmother passed away. After my grandmother’s funeral, I decided to include one of the orchids from the funeral service. They were beautiful and symbolized to release from the pain and dementia my grandmother had suffered with for years. The orchid symbolizes our family connection and my grandmother’s release from years of struggle.

Figure 4.12 Process of “Orchid” by Shauna DeLong 2019
As the painting progressed, I decided to included water and grass. The face is being pierced by both and the water somewhat resembles roots. Initially, I wanted this painting to represent pain and suffering, but I think in its final form, it represents hope and persistence through hardships.

4.8 Documentation of Refraction

This painting originates from a photograph taken by my roommate. In the photograph I am underwater in a rooftop pool that has a clear wall, so the background of buildings is visible below. I included the buildings, but in the final version they are not very prominent. I used the photo transfer process that I used in “Voyager” to transfer images of water from my travels. As I
mentioned earlier, water plays an important part in my life. I grew up on Lake Lanier, swimming and skiing and went to the beach yearly with my family. I hope to be able to move closer to the ocean. I wanted to document the feeling of joy and connection I have in the water. I attempted the challenge of layering paint in a way that illustrates the refraction of water. This was one of the most difficult paintings I have done. I experienced many disappointing versions of it. Eventually, I came to a point where I felt the colors, lights and darks accurately and expressively captured the moment and emotion, but it was a difficult process and very frustrating at times. Overall, I think the painting portrays the emotion and the transferred images add a context of travel and communicated the presence of water effectively.

Figure 4.14 Process of “Refractions” by Shauna DeLong 2019
4.9 Documentation of Crash and Crumble

On July 29, 2019 I crashed into a speeding car. I was turning left with a green arrow and could not see the car on the far lane that was flying through the intersection. The impact and the aftermath were traumatic even though I walked away physically unscathed with only a small scar on my wrist from the emblem of the steering wheel after the airbag ejected. No one was injured and we all walked away from the crash, but I still experience anxiety driving, and especially when making a left turn.

After the crash, I borrowed my mom’s car and it was parked in front of my house when it was hit by a drink driver in the middle of the night. The car was totaled. I chose to include both
mangled cars in the painting. I included the picket fence, an upside-down Atlanta skyline, and a sea urchin as symbolism. The picket fence is smashed in the painting because my idea of happiness and what life should be transformed from what it was. I made a great decision buying my house, but it doesn’t have to be the American dream for me. My dream is to travel, maybe even get paid to do it. The sea urchin in the middle of the two cars symbolizes the impact of the crash, and the ensuing pain that can accompany such an ordeal. The background skyline of Atlanta is a photo transfer that is upside down and crumbling. This represents my disillusionment. Atlanta is a great home, but I recognize that I am most excited to come back home only after extensive exploration. I have grown in so many ways in my years here, but I am becoming complacent and have a need to integrate more of the world into my being.

The crash was an initiating event which began a deep contemplation of what I want out of my life and where I see myself going. I began to see other possibilities for exploration through teaching abroad. I have been applying to many international schools in order to gain experience of living in another country or place. Experiential learning is a large motivation for this change.

Figure 4.16 Process of “Crash and Crumble” by Shauna DeLong 2020
Figure 4.17 Process of “Crash and Crumble” by Shauna DeLong 2020

Figure 4.18 “Crash and Crumble” by Shauna DeLong 2020
As I look back on this series of paintings, I realize I have had the opportunity to process many traumatic feelings and reconnect with my dreams. That is what this studio-based project was intended to do, to serve as a means of expression, self-care and reconnection to my purpose. In the following chapter, I will discuss what I learned and what it might imply for my future work as an artist and teacher.
5 CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Methods Revisited

When I initiated this project, I had the following questions in mind:

1. How might the act of artmaking help me process the secondary trauma that I experience as a teacher, while navigating challenging personal experiences, impart a routine of self-care through a visual means of expression?

2. How might my studio practice impact my teaching?

Through this process, I have experienced much personal growth as a student, a teacher and as myself. I have become more patient and accepting of my limitations, embracing my flaws while becoming more mindful of art’s role in my life. I have discovered that art and self-expression is not only my chosen career, but an integral part of my personal journey. Helping students learn to express themselves is a challenging but rewarding way to combine my beliefs about the benefits of art creation and provide a safe positive environment for students to benefit from artistic expression as well.

My studio practice has provided an important space for my own self-care. As a teacher in an inner-city school, which has an 80 percent free and reduced lunch rate, there are many challenges and situations that arise because my students face a wide variety of economic hardships. In addition to the circumstantial difficulties they face, many have experienced severe trauma. The face difficulty in navigating challenging teenage emotions as well as a search for identity. I belief by devoting more time to my personal self-care through a studio practice, I am better equipped to provide insights from my personal experience to my students. I have shared my research findings with my students on studio practice as self-care. One of my mantras that I tell them is, “drawing/painting is good for your brain”. They even recite it back when I am struggling with proportion or color blending. Even an unskilled artist benefits from the act of
creating. The act of creating shouldn’t be exclusive or unapproachable to a novice. I do not want them to be intimidated by an assignment. So, I try to hang up all of my students’ work. I encourage and praise them for trying. The trying is redemptive for them and for me.

5.2 Reflections

Being an art teacher is very challenging. It is a job of service and of sweat and tears. There is meaning in service to others. I have found that through sharing opportunities and experiences with others, I experience them in new ways. I rely on my limited background knowledge, but I am constantly seeking to integrate more knowing and experiences into my teaching. Enrolling in graduate school was motivated primarily by a significant pay raise. However, the experience of my exploratory art studio classes and the challenging education classes pushed me to become more knowledgeable, but more importantly to become more aware of my capabilities. Through this thesis and the program, I have developed a deeper understanding of the process of learning and the way in which learning is acquired, not only in theory, but in application of theory to art education. I have also learned more about myself through art-making. The paintings I created stem from a place of connection to myself and a desired to understand my place in the world.

Maintaining healthy outlets and outlooks is a constant struggle. While visual expression is second nature to me, and an important part of my life, I often find myself lacking the motivation to work on my art. I am limited because I expect certain outcomes. I expect to be pleased with the results, often I am not. I have to keep in mind that it is good for me. Like going to the gym, I need to work-out for my physical health. I need to work out my emotions through writing and painting. Often though, getting myself in front of the canvas seems an insurmountable task, just like showing up at the gym or the therapist. Getting myself to that place of self-work is really difficult sometimes. I am always glad I worked-out, went to yoga or
running, or even attempted a weight training class. I am never the fittest person in the room, and usually I hate the entire time of running, but I am always proud that I even attempted it.

Similar is the case with painting. Sometimes I am frustrated with the outcome or the process. The process of a painting can be a lengthy sustained challenge, and sometimes I feel defeated by it. When this is the case, I try to remember the time and effort invested were not in vain, but a space and time for action. In the doing, learning takes place and meaning is transferred. As I write this, I haven’t put the finishing touches on two of the paintings in this thesis. I struggle with anxiety and loneliness. Anxiety has been with me since childhood. From as early as I can remember, I would make myself sick with worry. My grandmother had severe anxiety that manifested as neurotic behaviors and detrimental though loops that would consume her mind. I try to fulfill my life as much as possible, but there is still a lot of self-work I need to do in the area of becoming more mindful when anxiety presents itself and to become more welcoming of the idea of being ‘self-partnered’. I read that Emma Watson coined this rem recently, and I think it addresses the need for expressing the possibility of being single and content “It’s much more about your relationship with yourself and the feeling of not [being] somehow deficient in some way because you’re not with someone” (Contreras, 2019).

My next painting will address these feelings head on, flush them out and perhaps salve these wounds and illuminate causes. I know painting will help me sort through these emotions, because it always has. Painting is not the answer to my problems, not by a long shot. It is a coping mechanism and a healthy one. Pulling oneself out of a dark place is a process too. Painting will always be there for me when I can find the self-reliance to walk towards it and pick up the brush. I hope I can instill this same sense of resilience and self-work in my students.
5.3 Implications

Through application of researched methods and effective art-making activities, I have experienced successful and positive results in the classroom. The environment in my classroom is one where students have the opportunity to actively engage in art-making. I might set parameters around content or criteria, but the results and expressions vary by student. This is why I love teaching art. It is a safe space of learning through experiencing, and the learning is authentic because it originates from the individual creating it. Sometimes the criteria are even dictated by the student. For example, I might instruct the student to write and journal about a dream or feeling, and have them extrapolate as much as possible from their emotions. Then I might have the student create an index of possible choices they could make to represent several ideas visually. I teach an International Bachelorette Diploma Program class, which is a research heavy two-year course. In this class, I have students develop a historical context around an idea first, then I have them create their own individual interpretation of meaning based on research combined with their personal visual expression. Through the act of art-making and the connection to the individual students’ life, the art room becomes a venue for self-exploration, self-expression and validation.

While the process of this these has been a massive undertaking, I am hopeful that whoever reads it will find the research, my professional and personal documentation to be helpful in some way. I know that the insights I have gained will influence my career through approaches to learning and in my relationship with my students. I try to provide a space for existence for them, whatever that may look like. I try to offer space for community, self-expression, and humor. I love to make them laugh. I have gotten quite good at being their entertainment. I think it’s important to be a space of refuge, of connection to oneself and to others, maybe that’s part of spiritual learning, maybe that’s just how I operate best. So much of
what I do is built on personal relationships. After this process, I do feel a deeper understanding of why I teach art and how to teach my students about themselves and the world.

5.4 Conclusions

The theories of learning and the research around the benefits of art as healing, self-care and to alleviate trauma helped form the basis for the paintings I create, the assignments I give to students, and the words I type here. I am not sure what the future holds for my career, but I know that this self-inspection will be a part of my practice. I know that the process of making is a form of self-care. Just as showing up at the gym, showing up at the studio is equally important and oftentimes challenging to find enough motivation to make it there. I am never sorry I did, quite the opposite. Sometimes, I leave the session frustrated and defeated. Sometimes, I leave it proud and excited. In the end, when I have worked and worked and attended to the problems of the painting, I am grateful for the experience and I appreciate the struggle and the joy of doing and making. I hope to facilitate similar process with my students.

I recognize now more than ever how I must make time for art in my life in order to stay in wellness. Just as I have increased my frequency of yoga sessions, I have brought myself to the canvas more often over the course of this program than I ever have in my life. I am on a journey towards achieving my dreams. I believe in manifesting destiny. Through action and reflection, I can achieve my goals. I have secured an art teaching job in Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands at an IB international school. I reflect on a few paintings I made that centered around my desire to live in and be by the water. Now, in July 2020, I will enact that dream. I carved a path, applying to hundreds of international schools because of my love to travel, interviewing at several, but the position in Saint Thomas seems like a perfect fit for my soul. The staff there is warm and welcoming and seems equally excited to have me aboard. The position is one year only, so I have some anxiety about the future afterwards, but I believe the experience alone is worth the
risk of later uncertainty. I must continue to grow and change. I expect to learn a great deal from the experience of moving away. Through my travels, I have expanded my ability to perceive through various perspectives. This new opportunity will afford me the chance to expand and grow even further, integrating new ways of being and knowing. I will live alone for the first time in my life. I will be geographically isolated from everyone I care about, and I cannot wait for the challenges, and the exuberance of existing within a completely foreign routine and welcome the opportunity to encounter amazing new experiences and people.

I created two more paintings reflecting my current push for living by the ocean. One is a self-portrait of me on a solo trip to Puerto Rico. I stayed in a hostel in Rincon. The portrait is from a selfie I took on a rooftop which overlooked the sea. For this painting, I used watercolor and thinned acrylic to create the skin tones. The background blues and blue-greens are representative of the colors of the ocean in Puerto Rico. The cool colors of the background contrast with the warm skin tones creating a balanced and unified composition.
Figure 5.1 Process of Self-Portrait
I completed this painting in response to a class assignment. The plants had to be placed in the composition based on the rule of thirds, the principle of variety, and the plants had to break the boarder of the paper.

The symbolism in the painting are as follows: the white daisy represents me; the pink daisy blossom, my son; the rose, my sister; the dandelion, my mom; the orchid, my grandmother. The water represents our ties through family connection, while the coral and seaweed represent my love for the ocean and my future of living by the water.
It is difficult to see in the picture, but the glaze produced a sheen to the surface that creates a watery feel to the piece. Overall, I am pleased with the outcome and I will be using the technique with my students in the future.

Figure 5.3 Process of Flowers and Water
Figure 5.4 Flowers and Water by Shauna DeLong 2020
5.5 Postscript

Unfortunately, there has been a recent global pandemic that has put my career path in jeopardy. I am still under contract with the school in Saint Thomas, USVI; however, traveling is not advised currently, and no one knows when traveling will resume. I have decided to plan on moving there, but I am considering several backup options for work. They are currently interviewing to fill my vacancy in Atlanta Public Schools, and my colleagues are signing their contracts for next year. I am nervous about vacating my position, but I am hopeful about future possibilities.

During this uncertain time and using virtual teaching, one of ongoing assignment I have been using is a visual diary. Students take pictures with their phones and describe what is happening, as well as feelings or thoughts they had that day. I remind them that it is especially important to document their experience in these unprecedented circumstances, not only to document, but to express their feelings. The next step of the assignment was for them to share their visual diary, comment, and ask questions to each other in order to learn more about their classmates. Seeing students communicate and relate to one another online was very encouraging. There are some benefits to digital class. One I have noticed, ordinarily shy students communicate online more openly. I have found some great online resources for creating digitally as well. I am hopeful that this new platform will force me to learn more technology driven ways of teaching. My students have even helped me in organizing a better way to connect with them and offer solutions when technology problems arise.

Tomorrow the state of Georgia goes into a “shelter-in-place” order to curve the transmission of COVID-19. I intend to use this time to reflect, make art, and connect with my students over the internet. This thesis; the research in art as self-care, my paintings, and class
assignments, are tools I have acquired to help guide me in becoming better equipped to tackle a
digital learning platform and to bravely step into the unknown future of my career.

The work I have done throughout this program helps me impart some insight of coping
and self-care to my students. My students are undergoing a drastic change in their lives with this
pandemic. I try to provide them with options for processing these events. I hope that they are
better able to navigate life’s challenges because they know first-hand the benefits of self-
expression and self-care through their own personal experience in the art classroom.
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