

# The Aesthetics of Health: Service Learning in the Arts

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***Keywords: Oncology, Service Learning, Visual Art, Empathy, Community***

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In this research, we investigate the ways in which creating artwork for and with a cancer community of patients, doctors, and caregivers over an extended period of time influences the personal artwork of high school visual art students. The Visual Arts Division at Interlochen Arts Academy partnered with the Cowell Family Cancer Center in Traverse City, Michigan to explore the intersection of arts education and healthcare through a new year-long course entitled *The Aesthetics of Health*. This partnership arose directly from the experience of Megan Hildebrandt, a visual arts instructor at Interlochen, as a young adult cancer survivor and artist living with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Students in the course come from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds; all of the students entered the class with a different understanding of and relationship to cancer.

We chose to use a case study methodology in order to “understand a larger phenomenon through intensive study of one specific group” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.

94). By participating in this long-term, collaborative experience, we are able to observe how the students' artwork changes over the course of an academic year and how the depth and empathy of relationships built in a clinical setting improve students' ability to articulate themselves. This case study is descriptive in order to depict the events, processes and perspectives of the students' development over the time of the study.

Students in this course met with social workers to learn the differences between empathy, sympathy, and pity in preparation for their work with cancer patients. They also hosted guest speakers- Keith Fre, a Stage 4 Hodgkin's Lymphoma Survivor, and the instructor of the course, Megan Hildebrandt, Stage 2 Hodgkin's Lymphoma Survivor, to listen to different patient experiences. A third guest speaker was Emily Haan, a pharmacy technician assistant who spent two years mixing patient chemotherapy medications. The fall semester culminated in a guest artist visit from hosted guest artist Mark Gilbert, who exhibited his show "Portraits of Care" in the gallery at Interlochen and the Cowell Family Cancer Center. Gilbert led a series of portrait workshops both in the studio and at the Cancer Center with students. Gilbert's most valuable contribution was his deep understanding of visual art as a meaningful and potent medical research method.

This in-progress research began in September of 2016, and will continue through May of 2018. Students visit the Cowell Family Cancer Center once a month to shadow nurses, greeters, volunteers, and create artwork in the clinical setting. Students then

returned to their studios at Interlochen to create personal work in response to their experience at the Cancer Center. We used purposeful sampling to select two high school students from The Aesthetics of Health class- Brianna, 16, from Connecticut, Quinn, 15 from California and Jin, 16 from Beijing.



Figure 1. "I think it (has) internally...made me more sensitive towards people and more understanding...when I'm doing art (at the Cancer Center) I'm thinking about how people perceive it -this is all about the people you are making it for." - Brianna, 16.



Figure 2: Jin, 16, paints the fall colors in front of the Chemo Deck. “While the artists at first appeared timid in this environment, they now are empowered to help patients heal through art.”-

Katherine Horvath, Manager of Cancer Support Services.



Figure 3. Portrait of a Pediatric Painting by Jin



Figure 4. "(This class), for me, shows it is not just... the idea of cancer. It is more individual people who also have the sickness."- Quinn, 15

