

Inspired by an afterschool program to take place at Palmer School in Albany Park

Keywords: diversity, immigration, differences, culture, religious, strengths, resilience, community, youth, parents, families

Artist Alpha Bruton

Community Leader Melissa McDaniel

Introduction

The facilitator started the workshop by explaining to participants that project they were taking part in would be taken back to the Albany Park community, to help spark development of this idea and influence after school programming with a community art project.

Participants were given a brief overview explaining the history of Albany Park. The Albany Park Community has 40 different cultures at the school. There is a separation at the school due to the distinct cultural differences. The goal of the Shanti project is to bring groups together to help them interact. Through this workshop participant will focus on resiliency with a less emphasized focus on tolerance.

Alpha shared with the group that large doors were donated to the school and are being used as the substrate for the project. Today’s participants are being asked to create cultural symbols, elements of art will be the focus of these symbols.

Basic shapes will be the focus and include: circle, oval, square, triangle, rectangle.

Discussion Groups:

Participants broke up into discussion groups and were instructed to take their cards out of their envelopes and reflect on the words on the card. They were asked to interpret their word (i.e. technology). Participants were then asked to create words around their given word. They were asked how can you take that word and fit it into a discussion for community members.

After brainstorming within their groups, participants were asked to share their word and discuss how the word could be used to spark discussion between community members.

Words given out to different groups:

- Government
- Economics
- Human Rights
- Environment
- Global Warming
- Food
- Technology

One group (group three) chose to first share their word, discuss it's meaning, and continue around the circle. (Examples: Global Warming: "a larger impact with smaller acts that impact it" Technology: "innovations, networks, connections")

The group decided to either focus on one word or to group the words. They proceeded by grouping the words into piles.

**Government, Economics, Human Rights
Environment, Global Warming, Food
Technology** connected with both groups

Group participants were left uncertain of the end goal of the project, leaving possibilities open.

One participant, Melissa McDaniel, helped facilitated a discussion on the possible goal, mentioning the possibility of an after school project that would involve student and parent participation. She suggested that this activity could help come up with possible activities and project ideas for this future program.

Discussion began around what cultures were represented – Polish, Eastern European, Croatian, African American, Latino, and many more. What universal symbols could be used, a symbolic language. If so many cultures

are represented, using only one culture's symbols would exclude other cultures.

Could different cultural symbols be combined and represented to foster inclusion?

Shouldn't the participants work together to create their own symbols? One woman asked how basic shapes could be used to connect the words and ideas. Circles were suggested as a shape that shows a cycle and could symbolize connections.

How could other shapes be used? Why were these words chosen? How does this connect to what we are supposed to create? Should we ask?

Global Warming was said not to fit, and the card was flipped over by the group.

The instructor was asked for guidance.

The facilitator reminded the group that she gave them the words and that she didn't want to influence the group, but said that they were words that affected the community of the school. She felt uneasy telling the group what to do. She emphasized the issues that affect the schools that she visits. The group was pushed to move forward and create a dialogue amongst themselves. It was shared that all groups have currently made different decisions about how they will approach the words.

The artist stayed with the group for a short time to help facilitate the discussion.

Global warming was explained to be turned over because it didn't relate to community in the same way the other words did.

A Venn diagram idea connected the basic shapes and helped the group organize the words.

The group refocused themselves and an understanding was made that they would be making the decisions and guiding the outcomes of their discussion. They put the words in relation to the community and school.

- **Global warming** was flipped up and discussed as an issue that could take people out of their everyday conflicts and allowed people to view a larger problem that all people share.

- **Food** could be used to show the diversity of a community. School or students could be at the center of a circle.
- **Technology** could be viewed as a universal language, if people have access. This could be a tool to help connect people.

The idea of having concentric circles around the palmer community. Palmer school was added to a card in the center and then added connected circles facing outside on a concentric circle. The group sketched this visual idea. Discussion was wrapped up and the larger group reconvened.

Regroup

Discussed the Vagueness of the groups. There was a natural order or dynamic that happened in each group. The facilitator took on the task and all groups reacted differently.

The cards given included many global issues. Some groups focused on the world, and only one (the group documented above) focused on the school.

Group one:

Each person read their card, read them a second time to seek out emotional response, the word that started the discussion was **poverty**. All words seemed to be connected to the word poverty. Everyone is missing something, all different forms of poverty.

Group two:

The word **culture** was discussed and then other words were added that connected to the word culture. Through a naturally flowing discussion participants were able to connect the words on the cards. The word culture could be used as a gateway for dialogue.

Group three:

The group described above. The words were placed into two groups. **Technology** was the unifying word.

These three unifying words (poverty, culture, and technology) will be brought back to the Albany Park community to foster further discussion. Melissa McDaniel from North River Commission, a non-profit community based organization that builds affordable housing, helps businesses, education, and art initiatives. They partnered with the Shanti Foundation project and are now connecting Shanti with Palmer school to initiate a new project. Seventy-Five percent of the children are categorized as coming from low-income families. There are pockets of high end income housing. They have been working in the Albany park area for over 45 years. The artist, Alpha mentioned she did not clearly see poverty at the school.

Cultural Symbols

Using the basic shapes, thumbnails, and ideas participants were able to create cultural symbols.

- Paper was folded into 16 squares and the papers were kept folded as they thumbnails were created.
- People were asked to make their own symbols using triangles, squares, circles, rectangles, or ovals. The elements of design should be used to guide the participants. People were encouraged not to think and to work with speed. Only one section of the paper was addressed at a time, allowing artists to only see one design.
- Thumbnails were used to help prevent creative blocks.
- Participants were asked to choose two symbols that they like the best.
- They were then asked to re-sketch these two symbols.

This activity is often used by Alpha to help give opportunities for expression with out being suppressed by language barriers.

Large paper was passed out and designs were transferred onto this paper. Designs could be combined or one could be chosen. Possibilities were left open.

They were then asked to incorporate the words from the prior discussions into their piece.

- Most participants used the pencil that they were given and no eraser, some used paper to create a straight edge, and some used paints located on the desks.
- People were instructed to begin using the paint to fill in their symbols, and were encouraged to use the three primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) to mix other colors on their paper.
- Simple shapes filled peoples papers, while they created large colorful symbols. The room was focused and quite.
- The process of watercolor painting was discussed in relation the idea of vibrations. Artists can be like vibrations by dropping dialogue and ideas into a community and create vibrant reactions. Painters should think of this while they paint their symbols. Participants were encouraged to not paint solid sections, but to paint using vibrations.
- Purple is the color of healing and was added to the possible colors for artist's pallets.
- Participants were encouraged to stand, ask for supplies that they needed, or stretch during the workshop. Alpha revolved around the room giving gentle feedback to participants. She reminded them to add words to their symbols to help communicate their symbol.
- Painters were asked to start winding down and reflected on their work. Participants revolved around and look at others paintings while they dried.
- The idea of viewing work from different perspectives to help change it was given to viewers.

Wrap Up

The participants were asked to talk about their symbol with the group.

Group one chose to display internal order and chaos outside.

- There were similarities between groups work. Round organic shapes were most typically choose for group one

Group two had many triangles and lines.

- The idea of keeping cultures alive, while at the same time blending them. Separate, but blended, was discussed in another painting. Different paths leading to the same area was a message in one painting. People maintain their own path that becomes part of a larger whole. The ideas of peace and conflict were spread throughout the paint.

Group three had many woven circles and concentric round figures.

- One painter chose weaving as a way to symbolize the interaction of culture, democracy, voice, and inclusion.

The interesting similarities between groups painting were noticed. In the end the facilitator thanked participants for their work and assistance.

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