Community-based learning has the power to encourage and sustain the intellectual curiosity of learners. By most accounts, community-based learning is a process that creates a collaborative environment of scholarship that holds individual differences, as well as similarities, in high esteem. It is a process, as the phrase suggests, that extends beyond brick and mortar walls and artificial time frames. Community-based learning finds its content in the real world and at its own moment.

At the heart of participatory public art resides the objective of meaningful integration of the visual arts into our everyday lives. Successful participatory public art crosses boundaries to act as a catalyst that can address social, cultural, and economic issues. It is an approach that invites artists and communities to work together as a cooperative team. As such, participatory public art is the perfect raw material for community-based learning.

To familiarize the reader with the intentions of participatory public art as community-based learning, this article first introduces and investigates Community Bridge, an exemplary work of art by American artist William Cochran. Subsequent sections provide insights into fundamental concepts about participatory public art and ideas concerning community-based learning. A practical application and implications for the future of participatory public art as a community-based learning opportunity suggest how educators can approach and utilize the concepts.
Part I: Community Bridge

A few years ago when I was developing some teacher resource materials about murals, I came across a website (http://bridge.skyline.net/) with a photograph of a beautiful stone bridge located in Frederick, Maryland. Across the top of the photograph in handsome script were the words, "The Story of Community Bridge" while at the bottom of the photograph, as if to tease the reader, were two brief sentences: "This bridge is not real. It is an illusion" (Cochran, 1998b, para. 1). Intrigued by what these two sentences meant, I scrolled down the page where a somewhat tongue-in-cheek disclaimer confessed, "Well, OK, the bridge is a real bridge. But none of the stonework on this bridge is real" (Cochran, 1998b, para. 1).

Community Bridge, the website informed, is a masterwork of trompe l’oeil mural painting, a technique that artists have employed for centuries to trick the eye into believing that flat surfaces are three-dimensional (Dunlop, 2001). Community Bridge is so convincingly painted that birds attempt to perch on its painted fountain and visitors have been known to ask the whereabouts of the artwork, oblivious that they stand only inches away. Transcending artistic mastery, Community Bridge symbolizes "... the importance of community and the fact that what appears to be cultural, ethnic, and economic division ... is just illusory" (O’Keefe, 2001, para. 7). Underlying the mural’s content is the idea that diverse members of the community share many commonalities and hold a variety of similar beliefs.

A Bridge is Born

When the City of Frederick began to consider the renovation of their Carroll Creek traffic bridge, the plans called for installation of nondescript cast stone panels. Shortly before the preliminary plans were approved, however, artist William Cochran stepped in with a better idea. Cochran envisioned a community-based art solution for the bridge’s renovation, a mutual enterprise to physically and
Posters, brochures, letter writing campaigns, speaking engagements, electronic billboards, public service announcements, chalk murals on sidewalks, and a website sought responses to what became known as “the question.”

symbolically connect a diverse community with its shared roots. After careful deliberation the city leaders approved Cochran’s proposal. With the support of grants, private and public contributions, and assistance from teams of artists, Community Bridge was started in February 1993 and successfully completed some five years later (Stephens, 2005, p. 22). Cochran has since been instrumental in creating a variety of other works of art that encourage social interaction and provide substantial learning opportunities.¹

Conversations

William Cochran begins his participatory works of art with what he calls conversations; that is, discussions that prompt people to think deeply about issues and ideas about themselves and their communities. The first conversations for Community Bridge started with friends, but quite by accident expanded to a broader audience when one evening Cochran and his wife were walking along the site of the bridge project and happened upon three teenagers. Two quickly darted away, but the third stayed to talk. Cochran introduced himself as the artist and then asked the teenager a question he had posed to associates, “What object represents the spirit of community to you?” The youth responded without hesitation, “Two hands, one black and one white, one helping the other over the wall. Doesn’t matter which is which” (Shared Vision, 1995, p. 14).

William Cochran painting Archangel, an anamorphic projection on the Community Bridge that suggests a visual metaphor of how easily we are fooled by surface dissimilarities such as ethnicity, language, gender, and religion (Cochran, 1998c). Photo © William M. Cochran, 1998.

Each medallion boasts a single painted symbol that represents an idea suggested by many people. This medallion expresses the idea of equality. A never-ending knot can be seen in the small stone to the upper left. Photo by Sarah Grow.
From this fortuitous moment, as many people as possible contributed to the participatory artwork. Posters, brochures, letter writing campaigns, speaking engagements, electronic billboards, public service announcements, chalk murals on sidewalks, and a website sought responses to what became known as "the question." Thousands of responses were received from around the world, sorted into categories, and then reviewed and selected by the artist. Key criteria guiding the selection process directed the idea to be "simple and make a plausible stone carving, have meaning to many people; illuminate the spirit of community from an original perspective; represent a diversity of viewpoints; and [embody] the full body of ideas [T. Cochran, personal communication, September 12, 2005; Cochran, 1998a, para. 1]."

Looking Closely
The completed Community Bridge mural covers approximately 3,000 square feet. It is an elegant structure with a graceful façade of painted arches reminiscent of stone bridges found in Europe and New England. Approximately 2,200 unique stones appear within the work, each hand painted. Symbols suggested by the public appear to be carved on more than 160 stones. Representing a multiplicity of viewpoints about the spirit of community, these individual symbols include objects such as black and white butterflies, snowflakes, an African turtle, and a never-ending knot. Viewers are left to contemplate the symbols, their meanings, and how the viewers' own ideas might be similar (Shared Vision, 1995).

Circular medallions are located at the tops of the supporting columns where the arches meet. Each medallion boasts a single painted symbol that represents an idea suggested by many people: Clasped hands, a tree, church spires, and the earth represent racial equality, beauty and strength, freedom of religion, and the relationships between humankind and the world (Shared Vision, 1995).

Major features are larger paintings located at strategic points on the bridge walls, are much more complex than the medallions, and combine several ideas. Unraveling the symbols of the major features is much like solving multifaceted visual puzzles. The Unfound Door, for example, is a plain wooden door not easily seen behind a wrought iron gate. A key of interwoven circles hangs beside the locked gate as a symbolic suggestion that gaining access to the inner door is "the recognition that we are all connected, a notion made clear by the community's ideas" (Cochran, 1998c, para. 2).

Part II: Public Art and Participatory Public Art
Understanding the intrinsic difference between public art and participatory public art and how such a work of art can be motivation for community-based learning is important when contemplating Community Bridge. An examination of the fundamental parallels and dissimilarities between the two art concepts provides clarity.

Public Art
Public art, according to Bach (1992, introduction), is "... a manifestation of how we see the world—the artist's reflection of our social, cultural, and physical environment." Public art, it seems, harbors the assumption that it is created for the public. Whether a conventional monument that commemorates an important person or a nonconventional temporary installation, if the art is located in a space that is easily accessible by the general public, it can be classified as art for the public.

With these distinctions about public art in mind, an occasional consequence is that the intended audience can sometimes feel distanced from the artwork. This is particularly evidenced with works that are challenging to comprehend. One well-known example of viewer disengagement...
with public art is Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc, 1981. This site-specific sculpture aroused so much controversy and public disdain that it was eventually dismantled and removed from New York City’s Federal Plaza (PBS, n.d.). To overcome such art estrangement and controversy, an alternate way of thinking about public art emerges.

**Participatory Public Art**

According to Nikitin (2000): “… public art projects are most effective when they are part of a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to enlivening a city, neighborhood or downtown, and are produced in collaboration with the people for whom they are meant” (p. 44). Cochran (1998d) adds that “Participatory art is an invitation to the creative, expressive natures of people to explore together ideas too large to be encompassed by a single artist working within the limits of a solitary human perspective, ideas such as the nature of community” (Co-Creation and Participatory Art, para. 5). This is the realm of participatory public art, art that is created with the public.

By welcoming community members as active partners in the creative process, participatory public art strives to break away from the conventional roles assigned to artists and viewers. Artists become facilitators who oversee art products, while the community takes on the active part of creative contributor. This redefinition of roles encourages artists to better understand the communities for which their work is intended (Desai, 2002) and engages the public in meaningful making (Cochran, 2000; Project for Public Spaces, 2005).

**Part III: Community-Based Learning**

While community-based learning comprises a myriad of concepts that seem to defy a singular definition (Ulbricht, 2005), Owens and Wang (1996) suggest that it is a “broad set of … strategies that enable youth and adults to learn what they want to learn from any segment of the community [while opening up] an unlimited set of resources to support...
them” (para. 2). In looking more closely at this statement, the phrase “youth and adults” becomes crucial. With its suggestion of inclusiveness, these learners can be of any age, ability, race, culture, gender, or faith. In other words, community-based learning is not discriminatory and extends beyond classroom walls and content areas to include anyone who wishes to participate.

Community-based learning provides traditional and non-traditional students with opportunities to become meaningfully involved in community activities. These activities characteristically join together partners (e.g., schools and civic organizations) who concentrate on solving real-world problems. This sort of connection benefits learners as well as the community. When coordinated through schools, students learn skills of collaboration and cooperation while in an academic pursuit. An additional long-term benefit is often the development of civic responsibility. Tying this learning to the visual arts underscores the critical and creative thinking skills involved in planning and executing a work of art.

In strong contrast, students studying in customary classroom settings are more likely to study ready-made problems than they are to identify and solve their own problems, an implausible scenario in most adult careers. Lebow and Wagner (1994) contend that this school-to-work gap should be bridged with learning opportunities that more closely emulate what students will experience outside of the classroom. This includes working in teams and solving authentic problems. Such is the realm of participatory public art as a community-based learning opportunity.

Part IV: Application and Implications

It is not unusual for art teachers to be approached about providing student art for public places. Most often these opportunities involve installing some sort of student art in city offices or local businesses. While these venues provide showcases for student work, they rarely provide for additional learning opportunities for students or connect the real world to the classroom (Various art educators, personal e-mail communication, August and September, 2005). With a change in strategy, such situations can nonetheless become rich experiences for all who are involved.

In much the same vein as participatory public art wherein the roles of artist and viewer are redefined, traditional roles of art teachers and their students are subject to revision when aspects of community-based learning are introduced. Teachers become mentors who inspire creativity, guide students in learning adventures, and encourage persistence when answers are difficult to find. Students, in turn, become self-managers who are accountable for their personal learning. As responsibility for learning is placed upon the shoulders of the student, success becomes its own reward and this establishes a precedent that continues throughout life.

Practical Application

How can this be accomplished? In Stafford County Public Schools (Virginia) kindergarten through grade 12 art teachers involve their students and community in the creation of a public work of art with an intended installation in a public facility during the 2006-2007 school year. Using Cochran’s methods as a model, students are generating, collecting, and analyzing data that will be used to create a work of art that symbolically weaves the community together. Such active student and community involvement provides ownership of the artwork while bringing a sense of civic pride and responsibility.

Implications

Bruner (1960) proposed that educators should question whether the curriculum they teach is worth an adult’s knowing and whether the knowledge gained from the learning contributes to a child becoming a better adult. We do not know what the future holds for our communities nor for the students we teach; although, we can make a logical assumption that the future is filled with challenges that will require diverse and imaginative thinking. Educators should embrace the goal of ensuring that their students’ cognitive
skills do not become obsolete with the passing of time. Accessing the force of imagination through participatory public art, such as Community Bridge and community-based learning, contributes to a successful future for students and communities alike.

Placing participatory public art at the center of community-based learning helps students tap into their imaginations and turn that curiosity into useable knowledge. When William Cochran undertook the Community Bridge mural project, he placed the community in the role of learner, providing a group dynamic that resonated across social, cultural, and economic barriers to find a common ground that was later represented in the artwork. The benefits of such learning are manifold to the learner and the community at large.

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REFERENCES
ENDNOTES
1 In addition to Community Bridge, Cochran’s participatory public art includes Kardia, a recent piece created for the Cultural Resource Center of St. Louis that uses architectural art glass as a medium and The Dreaming, a planned five-story participatory public work that likewise features art glass (Derix Art Glass Consultants, n.d.; Cochran, 2005).
2 Traditional students in this sense can be described as those persons who typically would be found in conventional, age/grade-appropriate classrooms. Non-traditional students can be described as those persons who participate in the learning activity but are not enrolled in conventional, age/grade appropriate classrooms (e.g., people who participate by distance learning or adults with life experiences beyond what would be expected of the traditional student).
3 In this instance, community is defined as the population within and outside of the school district to include art and non-art students, parents, family members, neighbors, art and non-art faculty, and administrators.

AUTHOR’S NOTE
Teachers are encouraged to visit William Cochran’s websites listed in the references and resources sections. These websites offer in-depth explanations about participatory public art and include teacher resources.

RESOURCES