

# Community Art Academy

## A Public/University Library Collaboration

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In early 2016, the Memphis (TN) Public Library and Information Center collaborated with The University of Memphis's art education faculty and undergraduate students on the Community Art Academy. Twenty-three youth, ages nine to twelve, participated in the six-week program, which was funded by the public library's Friends group. (The budget of eight hundred dollars covered the cost of the art supplies, snacks, closing reception, sketchbooks for the participants, and T-shirts for the participants, library staff, and faculty.)

The goal was to provide participants a free, high-quality art program that supported literacy development and included visual arts and language arts integration every week.

The theme of the 2016 Community Art Academy was Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Music (STEAM). STEAM was incorporated into the weekly lessons through art projects, which included watercolor painting, puppets, bookmaking, collage, and ceramics.

The art students avoided giving too much information or too many instructions to the participants. Instead, they created an environment that included a hands-on demonstration, provided answers to specific questions, and supported the participants throughout the art lessons.

Library staff shared their expertise on children's literature and suggested specific books relating to each studio art activity to the university students, incorporating literature into the studio art activities. For example, books by Dr. Seuss were showcased and read prior to the puppet art activity. The participants then used the Seuss characters as springboards to



Puppets based on Dr. Seuss displayed at the Community Art Academy Celebration.

create puppets. Participants were encouraged to develop their own art-making skills, and our goal was to provide the environment and circumstances in which learning and art making could take place.

We felt it was appropriate to engage community members and display all of the completed art projects from the Community Art Academy at a closing art reception, held in the library's art gallery. During the reception, each participant received a sketchbook, a children's fiction book, and a certificate of participation. The reception was videotaped by WYPL, the library's radio reading service and television station, and later broadcasted on local television.

### In Their Own Words

Both students and faculty found the program beneficial; here are a few comments received.

One art education student said, "I was able to experience teaching in a non-school setting, yet I was also able to practice classroom management and plan an art lesson."



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Another added, “Without the traditional constraints of the classroom, the instruction felt natural, and the participants were excited to work on the projects each week.”

A library site leader added,

The University of Memphis Community Art Academy initiative was engaging and an all-around great experience. . . . One benefit was utilizing books for creating art. Other benefits of this initiative were that it helped the students develop [their] own creative process[es]. In addition, it increased awareness and capacity to recognize their own interests and individual talents. Moreover, the student teachers were beneficial as they motivated the students, enhanced enthusiasm, and instilled confidence.

## Program Impact

All parties felt the benefits of the partnership were mutual. The children’s librarians received professional development in visual arts instruction, which will be useful in planning future programs. Also, the Community Art Academy provided an opportunity for the library to perform outreach to the community and The University of Memphis via the visual arts.

The university students received authentic field experience in a community setting prior to graduation, and university faculty provided feedback prior to the art lesson. The feedback given prior to the lesson included logistics for art supply distribution to the participants, specific books that could be included in the lessons, and icebreakers for the university



students to include when teaching the community art academy participants. The experiences helped the university students build bonds in the community and strengthen their teaching skills, and it gave them the tools to replicate this program after graduation.

The Community Art Academy allowed students from various schools to participate in art activities and foster friendships, and we plan on offering it again in 2017.

We encourage library staff and university faculty to consider implementing aspects of the Community Art Academy into their partnerships. It will take time, but we believe libraries are vital and relevant locations for arts-based partnerships. ☺

## Program Planning Tips

Based on our planning experiences, we offer these tips for those planning similar partnerships and programs.

- Start planning early, and remember it is OK to start with a small partnership. The important thing is library staff and university faculty and students are willing to partner. It will take time, but we believe the results are worth the effort.
- Establish roles, expectations, and responsibilities for all participants.
- Recruit participants from various schools and community locations.
- When planning any art lesson, it is helpful for the instructors to be comfortable and secure with all aspects of the lesson and be familiar with the participants’ backgrounds and art abilities.
- Seek funding from outside sources.
- Be flexible, and always be prepared. For example, participants may finish early or arrive late.
- Document and showcase program results, sharing on social media and with the community.