

In this visual essay, NAEA Women's Caucus members gather at the National Convention to create collages in an effort to brainstorm ways to end violence.

Order From An Arts-Based Approach to Counteract Trauma and Violence

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LISA KAY and ALICE ARNOLD

The mission of the Women's Caucus of the National Art Education Association is a clear call for equity between men and women and a call for social justice in general. Discriminatory practices and different cultural expectations can have negative effects that explode into violence. Thus the mission is to remove barriers and foster support and positive relationships so that we all have equal freedom and opportunity. This essay is a visual and textual dialogue of ideas, images, and reflections to address the issue of violence that is so pervasive in our culture—in homes, schools, communities, and society at large—and a call to action to counteract violence.

and text written in markers to convey personal strategies and collective action to end violence. After 45 minutes of tearing, cutting, gluing, and writing, each group presented their collage of strategies/action plans to the other attendees of the lobby session. This part of the art session became a kind of “call and response” time as each group was asked, “What is your collage about?” When the group's spokesperson answered, a facilitator repeated the group's response; when it was difficult to hear due to extraneous noise in the lobby, the participants echoed the facilitator's words. The questions and the “call and response” served as an effective technique of pulling out more information and created cohesiveness between each group. Everyone felt heard. One participant described the lobby session as almost like a “happening,” an art therapy event. Group participants were also invited to use the NAEA Women's Caucus blog² after they returned home to share ways they have taken personal responsibility for collective action, to continue to network with those in the group. It is our hope that as you read this article you will experience the energy of this gathering and join the call to action to counteract violence and trauma.

Figure 1.
A group collage in progress.

The Project and Procedure

In March of 2013 in Fort Worth, Texas, more than 40 artists and educators from all over the country gathered for the NAEA Women's Caucus 6th annual Lobby Session¹ to address the issue of violence and to develop strategies to counteract trauma and violence. The guiding question for the lobby session was: “What are my personal responsibilities and our collective responsibilities to end violence?” As we focused on the question, each of the five self-selected groups was given an art kit that contained a folder; a variety of papers, glue sticks, and markers; and a handout to guide the artmaking process, which involved ripping or tearing, visualizing, creating, sharing, and reflecting. Using beautiful, heavy, colorful papers, each group was assigned to make a collage.

As we tore paper, we were invited to consider the impact of grief, loss, trauma, and violence in our schools and communities and to consider what action we could take to end violence. Talking and writing down keywords, at times with an explosion of inner angst, we reconstructed selected torn papers inside and/or outside the folder and added images

Responses

To continue the conversation beyond the lobby session, the authors dialogued about the event, reviewed the groups' visual and text responses, and discussed the issues raised by the group participants. The following is a synthesis of those exchanges presented as a conversation between the authors, with excerpts from the lobby session participants' responses. Photographs of the visual work and the dialogue serve to document the process.

Violence Is Part of Everyone's Life

Each of us has a very different understanding of what violence is, and there is no singular representation. (See Figures 2 & 3.)

Alice: This is a messy problem.

Lisa: It is and the issue is complicated. We all have different perspectives and perceptions of what violence is—based on our personal, professional, and cultural experiences.

The finished artwork was not limited to the two dimensions of the background sheet of paper, but became protrusions from both front and back. The result is a kind of visual discourse of the problem. One group described their torn paper collage and “the messiness of the problem of violence”³ this way:

[W]e didn't feel that we wanted to make something that was closeable, so all of these things are raised off the surface, they spiral out, they're interconnected, and they're off the edges. We went onto the back, because we think that the problem is kind of rooted in a lot of different things and flows through different systems.

Alice: Violence is a constant moving force, yin/yang, overt or subtle. (See Figure 4.)

Lisa: With such a complex and multifaceted issue, how can our voices come together to counteract trauma/violence?

It takes one person at a time, building the positive, chipping away at the negative to work those two things in tandem. People need to hear and see the problem and take personal responsibility. People need to listen empathetically. This involves self-reflection and promoting non-violent communication.

Another group participant shared her group's process:

To begin by tearing papers with a group without knowing intentions of others or what I would do felt and sounded like a chaotic moment of violence. As we were ripping, we found a face forming from the fragments of paper, humanity calling through the exploding collage of everyone's voices escalating in the lobby of the hotel where we met to make public the inhumanity of violence, our sorrow over those lost to violent acts, and to seek ways to heal and stop violence. Our collage is a memorial to all people who have experienced violence. (See Figure 5.)

Lisa: The sound of many people tearing papers and the action of this process in a way imitated violence. This sound and work might for some be a healthy, creative release or a way to discover new images. However, for others it could be difficult to focus attention on the sensory experience. Similarly, some of the students in my art class who have been exposed repeatedly to violence and experienced trauma and loss find it difficult to pay attention and focus on their artmaking process.

Figures 2 and 3. Each group presented different representations of violence.

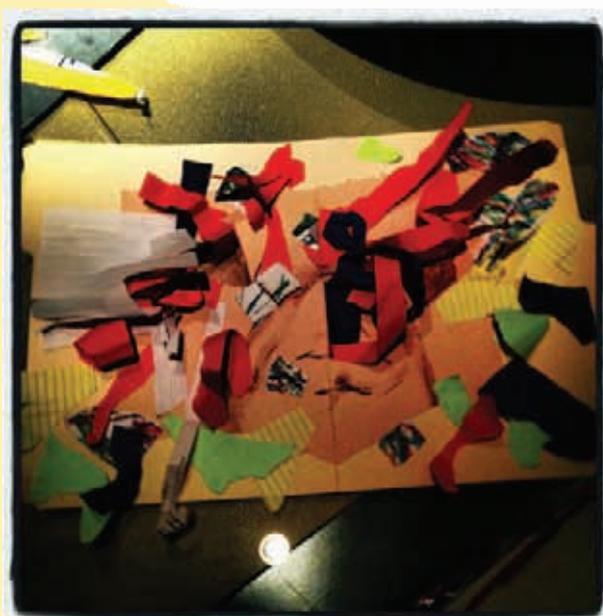




Figure 4 (left). One group's representation of violence.

Figure 5 (below). A memorial collage to those who have experienced violence.



Lisa continued: Violence, by its very nature, is volatile; it can take many forms, it can be loud or silent. Regardless of the form, violence has a far-reaching impact on our communities, our schools, and our classrooms. Unfortunately, violence is part of everyone's life—whether in news broadcasts, entertainment industries, or personal experiences. Art teachers can create safe places in which students can express their anger, confusion, and grief in ways that do not hurt others but instead bring awareness to what needs to change.

Alice: All have the capacity to become violent. If role models in our environment are violent, then anyone can regress into (or spontaneously invent) personal forms of violence. This can be conscious and planned—or a totally unconscious event.

Lisa: And we are all susceptible to secondary trauma or compassion fatigue. It is so important for us to self-reflect and use the creative arts as a form of self-care. (See Figure 6.)



Figure 6. A participant constructing a collage.

Interrelationship of Art and Feelings

As one group tore paper, they shared their thoughts about the importance of awareness and education about this complex issue. They stressed the need to affirm individuals. As art teachers, we can help others understand their strengths, transcend the negative, and express themselves through art.

This group concluded that:

We gain consciousness through understanding our own shadow and our light and as we do we are transformed. When we become aware of our self and others, we are transformed. It's about transformation. (See Figure 7.)



Figure 7. Detail of collage.

Lisa: This approach to art education is what I describe as transformational art pedagogy. A feminist approach to pedagogy that occurs in the context of mutual respect, cooperation, and caring for self and others; transformational art pedagogy focuses art expression on feeling identification, self-identity, and students' sense of place and agency. It is a strength-based approach that empowers students and promotes change by combining art, education, and therapeutic elements (Kay, 2008). (See Figures 8 & 9.)

Many people shared their own personal experiences of feeling violated by institutions that affect their lives. There are negative effects of control in the work environment and in institutional settings, of being manipulated by organizations, or bullied by corporations. Viewed as another form of violence is the power and control insurance companies have over access to health care services, resulting in barriers to women's health and wellbeing. (See Figure 10.)

Discoveries

As a result of the lobby gathering and art activity, participants felt validated and empowered to interpret violence in more positive ways. The varied ways of working, the multiple metaphors that surfaced, and the diversity of opinions yielded a greater sense of empathy and understanding for self and others.

Strategies to Address Violence

Alice: I am reminded of Carol Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan's study suggests that women bring a greater sense of empathy to decision making. They can be more "in the moment," more intuitive, or more present to those in their environment. I was horrified for days after watching the CNN media presentation of the December 14, 2012, Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. I could not stop watching. I felt like one of my children had been killed.

Lisa: I agree that the events of that day were compelling. In his book *Nonviolent Communication*, Martin Rosenberg (2003) suggests ways we can model and teach non-violent communication in the art classroom. We can model his four-part process: (1) observe what you see,



Figure 8. Group members created, talked, listened, and shared.



Figure 9 (left). Christine presents group collage and reflection.

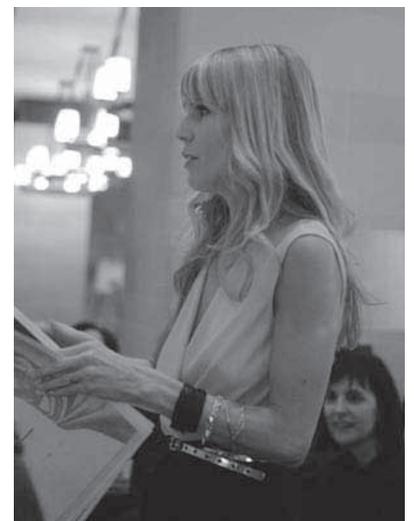


Figure 10 (right). Marissa presents her call to action.

(2) express how you feel, (3) articulate what you need, and (4) make your request.

Here is an example:

Observation: *I see lots of trash on the table and on the floor of the art room.*

Feelings: *I feel frustrated.*

Needs: *I need the room cleaned up since many people share this space.*

Request: *Would you be willing to put the scraps of torn paper in the cabinet or in the trash bin?*

Another strategy that I have used is the SET model, which stands for support, empathy, and truth (Kreisman & Straus, 1991). First, you offer a supportive statement to reassure someone that his or her needs matter. Second, an empathic statement is made that acknowledges one's feelings without being sympathetic. Finally, a truth or reality statement about the situation is expressed. For example:

Support: *I really care about you and right now I am very concerned.*

Empathy: *It sounds like you're pretty angry with this situation.*

Truth: *The truth is these are the consequences for what happened—what are you going to do?*

Reflecting on the Experience

Talking and Tearing: Catharsis and Catalyst

Alice: For me this Women's Caucus Lobby Session was a highlight of the NAEA National Convention and of my whole spring. I had felt abandoned in my grief for the Sandy Hook, Connecticut, shooting and felt somewhat misunderstood and alone before coming to this session. The process of talking and tearing became very cathartic for me—I was able to pour out my emotions with my colleagues and realized that many shared my deep concerns. I began to feel heard.

Lisa: We created, talked, listened, and shared our thoughts, ideas, and feelings—and in the process, we became more connected.

Alice: This open-ended media experience allowed us to dialogue with those in our group and process the violence in our lives on a deeply personal level. We were in what Daniel Pink (2006) calls "symphony"—the ability to see the big picture.

Lisa: What happened made me think of Barry Manilow's (1979) song, *One Voice*, which he sang at the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Concert in Oslo, Norway.

*Just One Voice,
Singing in the darkness,
All it takes is One Voice,
Singing so they hear what's on your mind,
And when you look around you'll find
There's more than
One Voice,
Singing in the darkness,
Joining with your One Voice...
(Manilow, 1979)*

We have joined together to take action to counteract violence. We asked ourselves, "What are my personal responsibilities and our collective responsibilities to end violence?" Now we ask, "What can art educators do?" Please join us. It takes just one voice—together with others!



Figure 11. A call to action poem.

Photos courtesy of Alice Arnold, Joanna Rees, and Michelle Tillander.



Figure 12. It takes just one voice—together with others!

Closing Thoughts

Not only was the lobby session activity a meaningful experience for those artists and educators involved, but the results have important implications for art educators as they intentionally attempt to break the cycle of hate and violence, inequity, and discrimination. The art classroom provides a safe forum for expression, for raising awareness of what is appropriate speech and behavior, for realizing the consequences of words and actions, for collaboration on a project, and for reflecting together on the finished product(s) and the experience.

Lisa Kay is Assistant Professor of Art Education & Community Arts Practices at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
E-mail: lisakay@temple.edu

Alice Arnold is Professor of Art Education at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina.
E-mail: arnoldm@ecu.edu

We were in what Daniel Pink (2006) calls “symphony”—the ability to see the big picture.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The NAEA Women's Caucus (WC) Lobby Sessions began in 2008 as an annual event at the NAEA National Convention. These lobby sessions serve as an informal forum for personal as political discussions and/action. See <http://naeawc.net/activism.html> for a history of the NAEA WC Lobby Sessions.
- ² See <http://naeawcvoices.wordpress.com/naea-lobby-session-2013>
- ³ All quotes come from the 2013 NAEA National Convention Women's Caucus Lobby Session.

AUTHOR NOTE

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