



Dinner in the Desert Kitchen: Reflections on Experiential Learning through Food, Art and Social Practice

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Abstract

Socially-Engaged Art (SEA) is inherently experiential in nature, and the realm of Art as Social Practice has historically used food as a means to achieve both social connection and critical commentary. To this end, my collaborators, community partners and I have chosen food as a catalyst for experiential learning (EL) projects around topics inclusive of race, social equity, immigration, and sustainability. Since the 2014 formation of Desert Kitchen Collective, a loose collection of educators, students and advocates across Dayton, Ohio, we have partnered with food-related organizations in the creation of student-generated art works that raise awareness of food justice and sovereignty in general, and Dayton's food insecurity in particular. Over the years, we have experienced the challenges and successes often encountered in EL, which include addressing white supremacy and privilege, mobilizing undergraduate community-based participatory research (CBPR), and confronting barriers to transdisciplinary learning. This paper stems from research published in an edited collection of cross-disciplinary case studies, "Diverse Pedagogical Approaches to Experiential Learning" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), in which I relate these challenges against a backdrop of comparative, art-based, theoretical lenses. The chapter uses recent scholarship around performance art, public art, relational aesthetics and dialogical art to describe and analyze the project "Dinner in the Desert Kitchen" (DDK), an annual student and faculty-produced art exhibition, fundraiser and dinner performance created alongside local food organizations, including a foodbank and a member-owned grocery cooperative in a current food desert. The chapter considers the pedagogical design, practical implementation, and curricular assessment of three past iterations of DDK. The paper and presentation condense this discussion to offer insight into how this EL project has shifted during the global pandemic to more closely adopt strategies that move beyond recognizing and dismantling white privilege and towards building an anti-racist platform that continues to use food justice as a site with potential for shared, creative learning across social, cultural, racial, and economic divides.

Keywords: *Socially-engaged art, experiential learning, community-based learning, art and social practice, food justice, anti-racism*

1. Introduction: food deserts, food justice, and experiential learning

Imagine a desert. Invite any and all details that may emerge in association with this geographical term. You may conjure a vast, dry area with conditions hostile to most forms of plant and animal life. Your image may be barren, void of architecture, free of cars and traffic. Now imagine a *food* desert. This task may be more challenging, as it asks that you paint humans into the picture. These may be bodies navigating a built landscape where food is not entirely absent, but comes in forms unsuitable to optimal bodily function. In this world, nationally-franchised convenience stores offer processed, packaged goods and internationally-recognized fast food restaurants profit from meals high in fat, sodium and calories. Unlike the geographic variety, food deserts, defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as largely "impoverished" areas where residents lack access to fresh, whole foods, are not the product of earth systems causes [14]. Rather, food deserts result from human-wrought systems that have marginalized demographics with needs deemed less relevant than those of the dominant culture [5]. Like certain geographic spaces, food deserts are constructed through maps and zones and the whims of powerful cartographers. In the U.S.A., these landscapes don't occur naturally, but result from decades of biased urban planning and historic disinvestment largely targeting black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) [5]. According to food activists like Karen Washington, the term food desert, coined by white food academics and utilized widely within projects that often perpetuate racial inequities, fails to grasp the potential within these demographics [3]. Instead, Washington believes the term food apartheid, "brings us to the more important question: what are some of the social inequalities that you see, and what are you doing to erase some of the injustices?" [3]. While some object to the use of a term more closely associated with a political policy of segregation and violence, a majority of American food deserts have indeed resulted from discrimination on the grounds of race. Food deserts may be hostile to human life, but, like racism, their existence is neither natural nor inevitable.



In 2014, a loose collection of educators, students and advocates across Dayton, Ohio, formed *Desert Kitchen Collective* (DKC) to raise awareness of food justice in general and our regional food insecurity in particular. The coalition was an offshoot of the University of Dayton's first undergraduate socially-engaged art (SEA) course, with a curriculum designed by myself, another visual artist, an art historian, and a critical race theorist. Given our formational connection to food desert narratives, we still utilize this term, while also embracing applications of both food apartheid and food sovereignty within our food justice work [4]. Our first student cohort, comprised exclusively of art majors, discovered that Dayton ranked as the 4th hungriest U.S. city in 2012, and that, as in all cities, pockets of food insecurity exist in both its poorest and most economically secure neighborhoods [7]. We also learned that Dayton bears the troubling distinction of being the 15th most racially segregated U.S. city [13]. It is important to note that our student demographic is predominantly white and economically advantaged. Our pedagogy must address this situation with activities designed to begin the process of recognizing and dismantling white privilege, after which this early cohort used food justice as a means to address racial inequity through collaborative field work. This research and artistic production brought them in contact with local food deserts while limiting potentially inappropriate exchanges with vulnerable populations at this formative stage. Basically, we worked early on to define terms and cultivate best practices that would help establish and sustain the community partnerships I will discuss below.

The graphic design, photography and interactive installations created by these students have been amplified by subsequent cohorts whose project and community-based experiential learning (EL) has grown to include research around not only food insecurity, but also agricultural sustainability, immigration rights and environmental racism. As of 2021, we partner with additional campus units including a sustainability institute and a human rights center, and our SEA course places engineering, humanities, and natural science majors alongside artists and designers to produce annual events around food justice. To this end, we have embraced a flexible, transdisciplinary methodology detailed in "Diverse Pedagogical Approaches to Experiential Learning" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), which discusses the challenges and successes of navigating EL within an academic environment that openly encourages but also often systematically resists cross-disciplinarity [10]. The chapter "Dinner in the Desert Kitchen: Reflections on Experiential Learning through Food, Art and Social Practice," offers case studies of three such events to highlight the design, implementation, and assessment involved in producing *Dinner in the Desert Kitchen* (DDK), an annual student-produced art auction, exhibition and dinner performance in conjunction with non-academic community partners. Below, I will define and summarize our DDK curricular process and products, while offering observations on how the current global pandemic and the recent strengthening of racial justice movements have complicated and informed our collective goals.

2. Defining socially-engaged art

SEA, which often resists categorial definition, functions through "collaboration, participation, dialogue, provocation and immersive experiences [as] organizations seek to embed themselves within the communities among whom [artists] work" [8]. This trend has been labeled the "Social Turn" in contemporary art, reflecting a shift by which artists, often working collaboratively, are critiqued on ethics and inclusiveness rather than solely on the formal or conceptual quality of an artistic product [2]. While SEA practices emerge from an established historical framework of socially-motivated, avant-garde art, their focus on social encounters, human togetherness and dialogical exchange challenge conventional art world notions [9]. Some critics of the medium see little difference between SEA and other forms of social work or activism; others are critical of SEA that aims to provoke or antagonize audiences rather than effectively work towards mutual understanding or social change [1]. DKC's approach favors this latter critique, and we aim towards creative, social engagement that borrows from community-based participatory research (CBPR), which prioritizes equity and asset-based collaboration among research partners [11].

That said, we recognize that practices within SEA, CBPR and food justice advocacy emerge from histories embedded in white supremacy, which assumes that the ideas and conditions perpetuated by white people are inherently superior to those of BIPOC communities [5]. We incorporate ideas and practices of anti-racism and intersectionality to counter the prevalence of white supremacy in our academic and cultural environment. We also recognize that working with BIPOC community partners demands a trust that can only be built over time. Thus, faculty must do the ongoing work of ensuring equitable exchange with our non-academic partners, while students may fail to grasp the longer-term, community-building aspects of EL within a single semester. For students, we often foreground the use and potential of temporal, artistic production, emphasizing the previously mentioned tendency of SEA to resist strict definitions. This resistance does not intend to alleviate social responsibility, but rather to encourage open-ended exchange that often values process over product and lived experiences over intangible metrics. When coupled with



an intersectional curriculum that aims to counter white supremacy culture, this work can actually serve to de-center structural racism, disrupt binary thinking, and enhance immersive, creative, socially-engaged learning.

3. Building and assessing project and community-based EL

Our SEA course is often team-taught or offered in tandem with a related course on sustainability or human rights. Initial readings and lectures provide an historical overview of SEA inclusive of diverse, transdisciplinary case studies. Focus groups and role-playing activities around race and privilege, such as the Racial Wealth Gap Simulation [11], allow for interpersonal sharing and reflection aiming towards trust and rapport. Next, students are introduced to our community partners, which include the Dayton Foodbank and our primary collaborator, Gem City Market (GCM), a grass-roots organization that has recently opened a member-owned, full-service grocer in a local food desert. After 4-5 weeks, students begin working with individual community representatives to develop projects that pair art and non-art majors to realize visions which may include zines, interactive installations, or performative interventions. For example, *Dinner in the Desert Kitchen III: Borders to Bridges* (2018) addressed human rights violations at the U.S.-Mexico border, and partnered with additional campus and community organizations working to secure immigrant rights and services. Our students produced an 18-page magazine featuring stories from local immigrant-owned food businesses, a 15-person dinner with meals from 5 independent Latin-American restaurants, and a 50-image art auction offering all proceeds to GCM. During the event, a curated roster of “special guests,” chosen to represent a cross-section of local leadership, sat at assigned tables interspersed throughout a larger art exhibition, which was free and open to the public. The guests discussed a menu of student-developed questions around food culture that encouraged sharing but also included challenging content. Meanwhile, there was an intentional social awkwardness as the “regular guests” perused the exhibition, often unaware of the significance of the formal dinner until our mid-meal announcements. This approach borrows from the more antagonistic brand of SEA to highlight notions of exclusivity central to our lesson that hunger is not a cultural choice but a systemic condition. Meanwhile, our partners and students sold artwork and engaged guests in activities that produced artifacts, such as written commentary on custom-designed placemats, which we archive for posterity.

DDK generally happens in week 15 of a 16-week semester. Thus, there is little time to unpack this final night, when months of work culminate in the scope of mere hours. We conduct at least one post-event focus group, where students reflect collectively before completing their final assignment: an individual, guided, written reflection with both qualitative and quantitative components. Of course, both the event and the course have many moving parts that are difficult to assess quantitatively. My published chapter on DDK includes qualitative narratives from alumni who have gone on to careers in multiple disciplines, and they reflect honestly on the difficulties and benefits of their respective cross-disciplinary experiences. I began collecting this data in 2019, and continue to archive the commentary for research and curriculum development.

One area lacking in our current process is formal, quantitative assessment from a community partner perspective. If we aim towards a sustainable CBPR model, we need to establish such assessment beyond informal exchanges. We have partnered with GCM for over five years, and several of our students have gone on to work with them in both formal and voluntary capacities. These exceptions to the rule that most students do not become full-time community advocates will likely remain the case, but they have helped establish good faith within our partnership. An effective assessment would also need to address the notion of fair-trade exchange. I have personally observed that BIPOC are increasingly asked to provide educational experiences to predominantly white students without formal compensation. Faculty members often offer fiscal or in-kind contributions to community partners in a manner that is neither equitable nor sustainable. Art auction proceeds have been the primary source of compensation to GCM, raising several thousand dollars for art projects conducted by GCM trade area public school educators – projects with parameters established by our community partners rather than ourselves. Such examples may be imperfect, but they offer insight into our ongoing efforts to establish sustainable exchange that is critical of and resistant to traditional modes of charity or service, as these retain troubling elements of neoliberalism, paternalism and white supremacy [5].

4. COVID impact: towards a sustainable, anti-racist future

When our university ceased in-person classes in March 2020, we were near completing a student-designed magazine sharing personal stories from GCM community members. The stories were to be published alongside art and research addressing the legacy of redlining, a practice initiated by U.S. banks in the 1930s that discriminated against BIPOC in the housing market. Redlining systematized generational poverty and established ongoing geographic areas of disinvestment and lack of access to home



ownership [12]. Much of the content for this publication was produced in the fall 2019 for *DDK IV: No Space like Home*, which exhibited creative artifacts raising awareness of the specific legacy of this racist practice within Dayton, Ohio. By April, our funding sources had been frozen and, by September, our 2020 DDK V event had been cancelled. Despite these setbacks, we have welcomed the time needed to adjust to a new normal that includes the increased national and global discourse around racial justice. We are currently moving forward with a 2021 collaboration that will continue to focus on legacies of redlining in our region and beyond.

The narratives and examples I share above should demonstrate that countering racism is already central to our overall EL pedagogy. However, anti-racism is lifelong work, and our call to action has been heightened since the murder of George Floyd bolstered a global movement demanding justice for black lives and equitable treatment for other marginalized groups. During this year of protest and pandemic, hunger rose across the USA despite the fact that, in 2019, overall food insecurity had reached its lowest point since the 1990s, when formal measurements began [6]. Due to social distancing measures, student participation in 2020 community-based EL activities was significantly limited. Nonetheless, community actions continued as GCM volunteers, including faculty and former students, conducted community wellness checks, facilitated community art experiences, and worked to provide culturally appropriate food to local immigrant communities cut off from income sources. Thanks in part to these recent efforts and the years of grassroots work preceding them, Dayton has moved from #4 to #42 on the list of hungriest U.S. cities [7]. While art or design are clearly not primary causes of this collective achievement, SEA has offered a space for education and awareness, and has brought together a diverse cross-section of humans who recognize food insecurity and strive for food justice.

At the outset, I asked you to imagine a desert. I now ask you to imagine a grocery store full of fresh produce and locally-sourced specialty products from an array of black-owned businesses. The market's exterior bears the colorful designs of a local, Nigerian-born artist, and it's one blank wall awaits the visions of an art team who recently received a National Endowment of the Arts Grant to complete a community mural. It's opening event included a pan-African drum circle, comments from state leaders, and blessings from local elders. It's shelves are stocked with items culled from community-surveys, and it's teaching kitchen awaits a season curated for learning and sharing. For the past 5 years, board president and DDK partner Amaha Sellassie has reminded us that, "this is not just a market, but a movement." It certainly feels this way on May 12th, 2021 when Gem City Market's doors officially open to the public.

Of course, this opening is just the beginning of harder work to come. The food justice landscape is replete with examples of endeavors that have failed to truly serve their members or deliver real results to at-need communities. As GCM's story is shared, politicians, corporations and outside NGOs are taking notice. The participation of such entities may ultimately both help and harm GCM's mission of diversity, inclusivity and anti-racism. As we move forward in our community partnership, SEA will continue to offer a space for learning and potential intervention. The vibrant presence of art and design will continue to serve as cultural indicators that our particular food desert is less hostile to human life, that our community can flourish against the odds.

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