

A Mile in My Shoes

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The inspiration for our shoe project came from an experience I had on one of my first days in my position as an employment specialist at Vermont Adult Learning. I was training and observing a meeting with a client. I immediately noticed that he was wearing a work boot that had the sole falling off, tattered laces, and duct tape to hold the shoe together. I remember looking at the boot and thinking to myself that this gentleman has a story to tell. He was a construction worker that had been out of work for a long period of time. He did not have a car and had been walking everywhere he needed to go. Our shoes can be seen as symbolic of who we are, where we have been, and where we hope to go in our lives. It was my hope that an altered shoe project would allow students to reflect on their lives and express that through this art medium.

The class that I first introduced this project to was a class of participants that received TANF (formerly called welfare) funding. The class is comprised of both men and women that are working on employment skills. Some of the students have a work history while others have had little experience in the workplace. Many of the students are single parents who face significant barriers including past drug use, a mental health diagnosis for themselves and their loved ones, and significant financial challenges.

I began the project by having a discussion with the students regarding the intent of the project. We discussed the importance of taking the time to self-reflect. I followed with a discussion of how the idea came to be and we discussed the symbolic nature of our shoes. I continued to discuss the project with the students at each class. All of the students were very excited about the prospect of participating in this project. I let the students know that I had shoes that they could use or they could bring in their own. The students then hosted a discussion on how much more meaningful it would be if they used their own. I stressed to them that they could choose to use either and should not feel obligated to use their own. One student came up with an idea to use her cowboy boots that she wore as a teen ager. She was planning on contacting her mother to acquire them as soon as possible. I also suggested that they may have some items at home that they would like to incorporate into their shoe, and that they were welcome to do so.

As we got closer to the project, I found some web sites that would help the students begin to brainstorm their ideas to begin the planning:

http://alterede.com/shoe_art_gallery

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/perpetualplum/2664501520/>

<http://starlitstudio.typepad.com/starlitstudio/2010/10/altered-shoe.html>

Before we began, I showed them these examples. I also had started a shoe of my own to begin to model the project. I started by painting a low heel shoe. I had let them know the story behind my shoe design. Several years ago, I had written a children's book that was inspired by my daughter. Since I have written it, the story has been sitting in a file drawer only to be pulled out occasionally to read to my children. My intention was to paint the shoe and put portions of my book on the shoe as well as taking some illustrations from other children's books to show my love of children's literature. I prepped my shoe just prior to working with the student projects so we could work on our projects together.

Challenges

Even though the students showed a great interest and desire to participate in the project, I did face some challenges. The biggest challenge was finding a time that students could come in and work on the shoe. I set aside a "shoe lab time" that ended up not working out. Despite calling students the day before to confirm their attendance, no one attended. After some brainstorming, I came to the conclusion that probably the first sunny Friday in a long time was not the best timing on my part. I would not give up though. I talked with the students at class, and we determined that working on the shoes after class was a better option. They would already be here, and classes are not held on Fridays. Because of the challenges our students face, life events occur and I have learned that flexibility is a very important attribute to maintain. We were also facing a decrease in enrollment so that was a challenge. If I were to change something, I would change my timing and build the activity into the class time.

At last, I was able to meet with my student that brought in the cowboy boots. She had decided she wanted to paint the shoe an electric green. It was a very fitting color. She is a very bright, outgoing individual. I prepped the boot for her, so it was already primed and ready to go. I had purchased some Gesso, but after trying two different cans that did not work, I decided to use some spray primer that I had in my garage. It worked very well. The first day she came in and painted her boot the electric green color. On the second day, she began to add things that she had brought from home. She included pictures of her siblings as she is very close to her family and looks up to them as role models. She

also put a clock on her boot to signify the time that has passed as well as all of the time that she has left to achieve her goals.

I also worked on a shoe project with someone for whom I am providing one-on-one employment services. I had immediately thought of her after I had not talked with her in a few weeks. Her father that she had been caring for had recently passed away after a long illness. I had given her a few weeks to grieve for her father. After about three weeks, I had her come in for a meeting. She was very emotional and was having a difficult time moving forward. She had not searched for a job and was not the bubbly go getter that I was used to seeing in my office. She has experienced the loss of a job and the loss of her loved one within a few months. She is a woman that has worked hard her entire life and is determined to achieve her goals. When she arrived to my office, she was visibly shaken and upset. She expressed what a difficult time she was having in moving on. After talking with her for a while, I told her about the shoe project. We discussed how sometimes expressing your feelings through art is a wonderful way help ease stress. Her body language immediately changed. She had stopped crying and was sitting tall again. By just discussing working on the project, we were able to make a few small steps in moving forward.

I had come back two days later. She had a resume to email out. She was very nervous and running at high speed. Her hands were visibly shaking. I suggested she take a step outside to take a walk while deep breathing. After her walk she came back in with her hands as still as a surgeon's and was ready to work. She pulled out of her bag a white shoe with a stiletto heel. She first wanted to email her resume out. She told me of her love for high heels even though they did nothing for her bad back, she will always wear the highest of heels. Before she started the shoe, she insisted she email out her resume. She was able to successfully send out her application and then dove into her shoe. She brought in puzzle pieces to signify life as a puzzle. She also included her love of gardening and jewelry that reminded her of her grandmother whom she had spent much of her child hood with. She also included a picture of herself and her parents at her college graduation. It was a huge accomplishment for her and one that her father was especially proud of as she had graduated from his alma mater. When she was finished her face expressed a feeling of accomplishment and many smiles. She left saying, "This was a good day, a really good day. It has been a long time since I have had one." During our next visit a few days later, she was back on track. She had been to a job fair, submitted an on line application, and made a contact at the Department of Labor. It was the time spent with me working on this project that allowed her to grieve for her father and begin the journey of moving forward. It was wonderful to see the spark back in the eyes of this very vibrant, can do anything single mother of two.

This project gives the participants the chance to celebrate their achievements, grieve the ones they love, focus on their future, and reflect on their past journey. Each shoe has a journey it has been on and a story to share. For those who would like to share their work, it is a way for others to see what it is like to travel “In My Shoes.”

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