

## Life Journey through Altered Shoes Project

By Sarah Bayer, Project Hope, Roxbury, MA

The intention of this lesson was to use shoes as an artistic vehicle to express past, present, and future of each student's life, recognizing shoes as a metaphor for our life journey. We wanted to create a relaxing space for students to tap into their creativity and reflect on where they've been, where they are now, and where they want to go in their shoes. We designated five weeks for the project, which included time for a reflective writing piece and a final celebration and presentation of the shoes.



Our Women of Strength class met once a week on Mondays. We had 35 women in three pre-GED levels who worked together in this class, which served as a foundation and support class for their academic subjects. We spent time discussing the project with the women before getting started with the actual transformations.

We had solicited donations of used shoes from a wide network and had received even more than we needed, ranging from cowboy boots to stiletto heels. It was good to get a variety; students could then choose something that “fit” them.

### First Class

We shared images of altered shoes to illustrate the possibility of how a shoe can be transformed. (See images below.) We also handed out a section of the [Altered Shoes Lesson: Tracing a Journey](#) lesson that explained metaphor and symbol. Then we broke into groups of four to five students per table to work on a “Reflections on my Shoe Journey” worksheet. (See [Altered Shoes Prep Grid](#).) This worksheet consists of prompts for reflection on past, present, and future. Students chose the shoes they wanted to transform. We gave students time to make some preliminary sketches for their altered shoes.

### Second Class

The following week we set out the materials students could choose for transforming their shoes and gave a brief overview of them. (Hint: Have enough on hand for variety but not so much that it can be overwhelming.) We then gave the students the rest of the class to gesso their shoes. Tables were prepared ahead of time—covered



Gessoed shoes ready to transform

with newspaper and supplied with containers of gesso and brushes. We explained to students that once the gesso dries, it provides a nice surface to paint and to which one can adhere different materials. A few students wanted to preserve some parts of the natural materials on their shoes. We supported them to do this as a way to incorporate the existing design, materials, and textures into their shoe story. We invited the students to enjoy the process of painting their shoes with the gesso, reminding them that they would now have this blank canvas on which to work.



We also handed out a sign up sheet for students who wanted to request particular materials for their shoes. For example, some students wanted images of their countries' flags or maps of their cities; others wanted to bring in family photos to be photocopied. At the end of the class the shoes were placed on plastic trays so they could be moved to an out of the way area for drying.



### Third Class

We set up the room in the same way as previous classes –four to five students per table. We supplied each table with a variety of paints, brushes, containers of Mod Podge, water to rinse their brushes, and scissors. Tables were lined up in the center of the room going the length of the room.

We organized each table by type of material. One table had paper of all colors, patterns, textures, etc. We had a table with materials such as cloth remnants and recycled objects we got from a local recycling center. Another table had buttons, shells, sequins, glass circles, stickers, foam letters, and a variety of dried beans.

We invited the students to come up by table and select the materials they wanted to use. We gave them each a clear, two-quart zip lock bag with their name on it to store their items they selected. I handed out a worksheet with basic instructions reminding the students to stay with the process and to try not to focus too much on the end result. The idea was to encourage them to use whatever they were moved by to create and to guide them to the next step.

I also outlined an example to illustrate how they could think about symbols and metaphors to represent the various aspects of their life journey. Shalise, Lenore, and I moved around the room and sat with different students as they discussed their ideas. This allowed us to support the students to experiment with mixing color or brainstorm ideas they were having about a particular theme they wanted to represent. I also spent quite a bit of time copying and reducing family photos so they were small enough to fit on the surface of a shoe. One student asked me

to copy a poem she wrote, and she ripped it and placed it all along the side of her shoe, along with photos of her family. It was interesting to see how students responded to things like color mixing and painting—processes many had little experience with. They seemed delighted to watch the process of red and white turning into pink, or red and blue to purple, and so on.

### Next two classes

We continued to set up the room with all the necessary supplies and materials for the students to use. A number of students had missed prior classes so they needed to catch up on the project. In between classes we brought the shoes to our second floor and had them on display along the hallway wall. I overheard a number of conversations students were having with each other about their shoes. We let the students know that this would be their last full class to work on their shoes. We wanted to make sure they could put the final touches on and not feel rushed with the process.

### Final Class

We offered the first part of the class for final applications and touch-ups; then we handed out an outline for them to do a free write about the process of creating their shoes. (See [Student writing about shoes](#)). At the end of the class I collected all the writing pieces the students had done. I let them know that we would be organizing a final celebration and display of their shoes and would invite them to speak and/or read from what they had written about their shoe journeys.



### Shoe Gallery and Presentation

The next week we set up a display of the finished shoes using shoeboxes under a cloth to provide different display levels. Our new Cycle Two students were there to learn about the project and hear what the Cycle One students had done. We gave them a set of prompt questions to answer as they went around the room and observed the shoes. We asked, “Was there anything on a particular shoe that intrigued you? If so what was it and why did it intrigue you? Did you connect with a particular pair of shoes? What about the shoe drew you in?”

Students responded with comments like “I really like the clouds on Ruth’s shoes. The blue made it look like they were really in the sky.” “The pretty pink and white on Kakisha’s shoes really caught my eye. It reminded me of Easter Sunday as a little girl.”



We set up the room with the tables in a horseshoe, with a table at the front of the room for each presenter to come up and share their shoe story. We invited the students to get up with their shoe and share what they wanted about their story as well as their experience creating their shoe. This was very moving and at times quite emotional given the students were sharing difficult parts of their lives. The students were amazingly generous with their willingness to share in such a large group. It was a tribute to all the work they had done together in the five weeks we spent on this project.

### **Thinking Back**

This was a very successful project on a number of levels. The students expressed appreciation for having enough time to really delve into the project and not to feel constantly rushed to finish. They also felt it allowed them time to reflect on aspects of their lives they often didn't think about. They loved looking at what each other came up with and were visibly inspired by each other's creative work. We had a number of students who were absent quite a few Mondays so this made it hard for them to have the time to catch up. I made a concerted effort to give them their shoes and materials to take home so that they could have the time and space to do what they wanted on their shoes. This isn't ideal as it's the classroom environment with the buzz in the room full of materials, etc. that helps inspire the students to allow their creative brains to come out! Most of the students were willing to get up and present their shoes at the final celebration. A number of these presentations brought out some emotions in the audience as the presenter touched on poignant memories and stories about their lives. In this way, this project offered the students outlets for creativity as well as the satisfaction of creating something that could be appreciated and admired by their peers.

### **Materials needed**

- Shoes!
- Gesso or water based white primer/acrylic or latex paint
- Variety of brushes—some for Mod Podge and some for painting
- Collage materials that will adhere easily: fabric pieces, paper samples, small items like charms, buttons, beads, cording, photocopied images of things students request
- Paper towels
- Something to cover the table
- Smock like coverings (garbage bags can work!) old shirts, etc.