

Eco-Art Education: Interdependence within Natural and Social Environments

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE  
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Summary of Capstone Project  
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Abstract

This capstone project examines the links between arts education and ecology. It explores the interconnections between visual arts and the environment to inspire curriculum design. Extensive research was examined as I explored the theme of eco-art and its place in and outside the classroom. A review of scholarly articles, magazines, books, newspapers, journals, and films led me to the discovery that art and ecology can be combined in order to create meaningful learning experiences that investigate the purposes of sustainability, identity, and social interaction. By implementing and documenting the process of eco-art making and participatory based art projects, I encouraged students to participate in activities that contributed to the betterment of local environments. The findings and data that I compiled throughout my study were used as a means to explore meaningful, relevant, and transformative eco-art education within the classroom and local community.

I applied action research to my study so that I might further examine the implementation of an eco-art education curriculum. My observations involved advanced high school art students, local ecologists, and various members within the school community. I was able to compile data as I read and analyzed journal entries, drawings, notes, and survey/interview questions produced by students. I investigated the ways my students and community interacted and devised projects that encouraged reformation, teamwork, and environmental stewardship. My overall goal was to create a positive learning experience that would lead my students to become more conscious of interdependence, within both natural and social environments, through visual art education that focuses on ecological issues.

## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Acknowledgements .....	3
Abstract .....	4
Table of Contents .....	6
Introduction .....	7
Literature Review .....	10
Methodology .....	17
Significance .....	21
Findings .....	22
Conclusion .....	33
References .....	34
Appendix .....	38
List of Figures .....	50
Biographical Sketch .....	51

### **Statement and Goals**

Cumberland County, Tennessee is noted for its scenic views filled with cliffs, canyons, canopies, gardens, natural springs, waterfalls, lakes, and rivers. Though nature lovers flock here for the beauty of the landscape, it would be a surprise for many to know that water purity is an issue here. For instance, an outsider may believe that the Obed River is perfectly clean and clear. However, local environmentalists recognize factors as deforestation is contributing to the pollution of the Obed watersheds throughout the county. Deforestation occurs as clear cutting for cropland and subdivision development takes precedence. Chuck Denney (City Parks and Recreational Director) states: “All over Tennessee, we’re seeing a lot of farms and forests turned into residential and commercial areas. Developed areas don’t absorb rainfall as well, so that water has to go somewhere. Here the runoff typically finds its way to tributaries, and eventually major rivers” (Utiacomm, 2011). Urbanization has led to erosion and this has created a risk for sustainability. As humans disrupt the ecosystem, ecoventions/ecological transformations become essential to the preservation and conservation of natural resources.

Art educators have the ability to help students understand the importance in environmental protection and the ways in which to become involved. As more artists begin to involve the public with community projects, a larger platform is created that promotes social awareness. For instance, in 1999 artist Ichi Ikeda developed the Manosegawa River Art Project known as “Water Ekiden.” The “Water Ekiden” artworks were produced through volunteer efforts in which four communities collaborated to help shine the light on water problems. Ikeda encourages people to “see what you have never been aware of before: the inherent stories of the land, new views of the landscape, intercommunication between humans and nature, etc” (Vulgare, n.d., para 1).

My Capstone Project revolves around the inquiries and questions I have developed, while investigating the topic of environmental art. Though many art educators may understand the importance of sustainability, there is still a lack of information as to how to intertwine art and ecology curriculums together in meaningful ways. I have uncovered the vital objectives of eco-art studies within and outside of the visual arts classroom. My paper unveils ways in which art educators may help students better observe and discuss ideas concerning the environment. I have inspected various types of participatory activities that could be incorporated into eco-art studies in order to create meaningful learning experiences. My research led to my students' becoming more conscious of interdependence within both natural and social environments through visual art education that focuses on ecological issues.

For nine weeks, I implemented curriculum activities based on eco-art which led to the development of a larger community based project. I taught a variety of lessons and engaged students in preparation for an ecovention. The term ecovention is utilized to “describe an artist-initiated (the ‘I will’) project that employs an inventive strategy (the ‘I know’) to transform (the ‘I can’) a local ecology” (Spaid, 2003, para 1). Through the use of an action research plan, I collected information that allowed me to contemplate on student learning and foster the growth of my teaching practices. The research that I conducted in both the classroom and the community involved planning, action, observation/monitoring, and reflection. I investigated the environmental attitudes and concerns of my students, recorded the challenges and achievements of place-based education, and encouraged students to become more engaged in social activism.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions inspired my study of eco-art:



1. How can art educators create meaningful, relevant, and transformative eco-art education within their local communities?
2. How can participatory eco-art activities lead to productive and meaningful collaboration?
3. How might the study of eco-art impact student understanding and reflection of their own role in protecting the environment?

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

I assumed that environmental art projects would have the capacity to help my students better understand the importance of sustainability. I believed that my eco-art activities would make a difference in how my students might feel in regards to nature. Ultimately, I felt that my teaching would have an effect on the youth in my classrooms and that they would begin to realize the power of environmental responsibility. As my students worked within the community, I speculated that organizations would begin to see and understand different viewpoints about art in connection to ecology, too. I anticipated that the public would gain insight about the ways art education is beneficial in regards to environmentalism.

There were some limitations to my study. For instance, when working within a limited time frame one must be prepared that a project might not reach full fruition. Nine weeks may sound like a long duration of time, but when designing a curriculum unit that involves collaboration with community partners and extensive projects, a lot of extra planning is needed. I encountered challenges in facilitating community-based action research as strong commitment and collaboration were essential. I work within a small classroom, so there were storage issues when developing spatial arrangements for the large-scale project designs. Also, I found it

difficult to work outdoors as snow, ice, and below average temperatures (Tennessee had a top 10 cold January) during the winter often prevented in depth field observations.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review provides a context for my research into the area of Environmental Art Education. I have examined art and science related materials such as journals, videos, magazines, bulletins, brochures, blogs, and books in order to compile useful information. Though I found a plethora of resources while examining my theme, the most vital scholars I discovered while on my journey were: Doug Blandy, Sally Gradle, Ronald Neperud, and Kevin Slivka.

Most of the eco-art based texts that I have read concluded that the inclusion of ecology is important within the field of art education. Most of the experts noted that art teachers could make a difference in the ways students understand and practice sustainability. However, authors Neperud (1997) and Slivka (2012) identified many art education practices that actually work against the ideas of environmental education. It also important to note that a few of the writers I discovered stressed that the study of environmental art must move beyond traditional, two-dimensional art making in order to make the biggest impact on learning and social activism. For instance, Blandy (2011) drives the point that connectedness to the environment is most beneficial when we work in collaboration with others and nature.

### **Key Words**

Throughout this literature review, the term “sustainability” will refer to trends and issues directed towards the preservation of natural resources. Sustainability is connected to the word sustenance which entails the act of nourishment. The Environmental Protection Agency states that "sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can

exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations” (EPA, n.d.).

“Critical Place-Based Pedagogy” is another key term that is utilized time and again within research pertaining to environmental art. Place-based pedagogy allows for cross-curricular intermeshing to occur within environmental art studies. Strategies are created in which connections can be tied to culture, environment, and specific locations. Through the use of this contemporary methodology, educators can provide “a robust framework for the theory and practice of art education that is concerned with ecological issues” (Graham, 2007, p. 375).

Another word that appears within this study is “ecovention” (invented by Amy Lipton and Sue Spaid). “Coined in 1999, the term merges (ecology and invention) to describe artist-initiated projects that employ inventive strategies to physically transform a local ecology” (Bower, 2010, para 9). Ecoventions often involve working within a community towards the development of art works that help to restore the environment. These sustainable acts are often dubbed as ecologically restorative projects. Artist, Mel Chin, is one exemplar well known for his green efforts at extreme soil remediation (<https://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/chin/clip2.html>). Such environmental solutions are artistically crafted in hopes of creating public awareness through public spectacle.

“Environmental art” is a term that is often used interchangeably with others. Examples include, but are not limited to: nature art, eco-art, earth art, and bio-art. Environmental art serves as an umbrella for many specific types of artistic endeavors that are tied to ecology and preservation. Works are created and result in many different forms such as documentary projects, sculpture, earth works, performances, and land art. Figure 1 shows the many terms that can be identified as the term “environmental art” is explored.



Figure 1. Environmental art is an umbrella many other terms fall under.

### Problems

As the world becomes more industrialized, the problem of over-indulgence becomes bigger and bigger. The impact on natural resources in connection to population growth is profound. Environmental threats impact the future and sustainability of the world. Pollution, deforestation, human health issues, is all a direct result of mass production. There has never been a better time to study sustainability as we are “constantly reminded that the rate of societal (an ecological) change is occurring at an even faster rate” (Butler, 2007, p.38).

As art educators, it is important to question our own practices within the classroom as they relate to ecological concern. Excessive use of water, constant chemical clean-up, surplus material orders from catalogs, endless reams of tissues, paper towels, and copy paper can all lead to destruction of the environment. Slivka (2012) notes: “Unabashed advocacy of arts education practices without attention to art production involving consumption and waste-as-squandering has overlooked inherent problematics tied to sustainable practices” (p.313). If projects are meant

to bring attention to the issue of consumption, perhaps a meaningful plan of action is in order. Even the collection or hoarding of recycled materials for a potential craft project based on nature may not provide the type of purposeful interactions needed to incorporate ideas about socially aware art making. Neperud (1997) mentions that several curriculum projects he has observed in the past were linked to ecology, but “large quantities of art materials seemed to encourage traditional ways of making art, rather than focusing on the intended ecological issues” (p. 17).

One of the main purposes of including ecology into the art classroom is to help students become more globally conscious. However, there are several issues that stand in the way of creating environmental based art curriculums. With numerous education systems being directly focused on standardized testing, many art teachers are hiding away from activities that may not result in the outcome of a pre-set, uniformly mastered skill. Some teachers are concentrating more on traditional environmental aesthetics as opposed to contemporary practices that may lead to more conceptual reasoning. If solo representational art making activities are all that an environmental art curriculum has to offer, the potential of purpose behind the projects may be a lost cause. Neperud (1997) goes on to add that “A relevant relationship between art and environment cannot be achieved by simply considering nature as subject matter or as a material from which to create art” (p. 20). With these obstacles in mind, how might art educator re-envision teaching that incorporates meaningful lessons? How can teachers help students become more socially aware, introspective, and renewed through ecological studies?

### **Eco-Art Identity**

Ecological studies can be utilized to help young artists use their artistic voices. People often become very closely rooted to their surroundings in which the importance of environment takes on new meaning. Students can explore the topic of identity by looking at the many ways

contemporary artists are making eco-art pieces that not only speak to the public, but speak to themselves as global citizens. Projects based on individualism and environmental decay allows for deeper reflection into how we are culturally influenced. Observations (i.e. students may look at thematic boards on Pinterest, ScoopIt, etc.) and discussions about conceptual artists and their works could lead to a greater understanding in how a sense of self can be embodied within eco-art:

Artist Chakaia Booker bases her works of art on what it means to be an African American female artist. She collects rubber tires and creates huge installation pieces that weigh thousands of pounds. Though her sculptural designs are clearly defining the issues of over-consumption they also convey a message from her inner self. Within her piece titled *Acid Rain* viewers can observe “the subtle variations of black hues and tonalities relate to African American identity issues and the role of the color black in modern art, as seen in the artwork of Kasimir Malevich and Frank Stella. While the tire treads, textures, and patterns are reminiscent of African textiles, Booker’s manipulation of the tires evoke African scarification practices” (Hoffman, 2011, para 4).

In the project, *Running the Numbers*, Chris Jordan decided to take a look at worldly issues that affect sustainability. Much of this work counteracts consumer culture. For instance, his art piece “Cigarette Butts” is a realistic pictorial scene of a forest that is composed of non-biodegradable filters. His reflections on how contamination and pollution can affect our lives are relative to his concerns for future generations.

Jordan states:

A lot of my criticism comes from looking at the consumerism in my own life. Like many viewers of my art, I am also torn because one part of me wants to stay in denial, doesn’t

want to know about my role in this environment; on the other hand, I want to know and participate; I want to fully live and do my part as well. As an artist, I want to draw people gently into this conversation by raising the right questions. (Preuss, 2010, para 7).

Nils-Udo is an environmental artist that creates site-specific art works, and uses only found, natural materials. His art parallels the work of Andy Goldsworthy as he creates three dimensional designs within landscape environments. He works with objects such as berries, leaves, twigs, and more, to produce sculptural art forms that explore the concept of play and life's ephemeral nature. His work invites the viewer to investigate newly imagined utopias. Nils-Udo once described his art as "My response to the events that mark my existence." (Nils-Udo. (2010). Artist Statement: Towards Nature. Retrieved from [http://greenmuseum.org/content/artist\\_content/ct\\_id-64\\_\\_artist\\_id-36.html](http://greenmuseum.org/content/artist_content/ct_id-64__artist_id-36.html)).

### **Embedded Social Relationships**

Many environmental art experts look at the symbiotic relationships between sustainability and teamwork. Blandy (2011) documents the co-relations between art, environment/place, and community, while describing how they are dependent on one other. He explains that "democracy is performed by working with others, building consensus, designing inclusive discussions, resolving conflict, acting on common concerns, and planning for the future. (p. 252). Blandy's research is important as art educators begin to teach students how to collectively solve present and future environmental problems. His writings contain information about the artists' role within society and explain how artists can have an active role in reminding the public why eco-art is essential to our well-being.

Gradle (2008) alludes to the embedded social relationships that can lead students to feel a sense of belonging among their peers, while they continue to "mark their own journeys in

relation to others” (p. 18). Connective aesthetics are often created in order to provide a way for learners to look beyond what they do on an individual level in search of how they might create communal action. Some critics feel that modern art of today should be solely centered on collaboration, activism, and dialogue. For instance, Gablik (1991) states that “Our present models [of art], which until recently have been focused on notions of autonomy and mastery, have been notably uncongenial to any respect of the psyche that is receptive or connective, that emphasizes the importance of relationship and harmonious social interaction” (p. 128).

Place-based pedagogy provides a curriculum in which to foster ideas such as connective aesthetics. Studies tie in ideas that focus on nature, community, and culture. Authentic interdisciplinary connections occur as the framework allows for ideas to be expressed outside the walls of the classroom. Through field trips, and on-site explorations, students are encouraged to begin internally resonating with their surroundings. Graham (2007) suggests that the “difficult challenges of culture, ecology and community are becoming increasingly important in the future of our students’ lives and demand an approach that extends the purposes of education to include issues of social and eco-justice” (p. 387).

Ecoventions put the theories of connective aesthetics and place-based pedagogy into practice. For instance, artist Mel Chin has developed a new identity for himself within his efforts to work in conjunction with the community. Chin worked with alchemists, botanists, and ecologists to create a “Revival Field” (1990-1993) that improved inner city neighborhoods by removing toxic waste from the soil. Within an Art21 interview, the artist stated “The survival of my own ideas may not be as important as a condition I might create for others’ ideas to be realized” (Mel Chin, Art 21 interview, 2001). Many authors look at the social relationships that might lead to restorative efforts and improve the chances for sustainability. Graham (2007) states



that, “involving students in these kinds of art study and practice connects art education to important issues within the local context of students’ lives and encourages them to consider the convergence of politics, power, and culture in the places they inhabit” (p. 379).

### **Summary**

My investigations inspired me to further consider the value of nature’s existence and the much needed study for eco-art. Consumption was one of the key focuses that I found many environmental education scholars writing about. I think that this topic is important for our students to consider. As the world becomes more industrialized, the problem of over indulgence becomes bigger and bigger. A quote that really struck a chord with me explained how “humankind’s shrewd endeavors shaped a natural world and harnessed it. Nature was a thing, an object to be used, crafted, elaborated on, but never considered as more than a resource” (Gradle, 2008, pp. 15-16). Throughout my curriculum (stored on my blog: <http://saldanaart.weebly.com/blog.html>), I guided my students into an understanding of how past, present, and future all play a part in our interactions with our environment. I helped my students better comprehend what it means to not only be an informed citizen, but I also showed them how they can make a difference. My Capstone Project was built upon unanswered questions in which I explored my community’s need for ecological restoration, and discovered ways to implement an artistic ecovention that would make a real world connection with my students. As a result of my study, I proved that eco-art has the ability to serve more than one purpose. It can be functional, aesthetically pleasing, and meaningful.

### **Methodology**

The research for my capstone study was action oriented. I documented the process of developing and implementing an eco-art education experience for my students. All of the

activities that my students engaged in are stored on my blog “Stream of Consciousness” (<http://saldanaart.weebly.com/blog.html>). The findings and data that I compiled may interest other art educators looking for examples of meaningful, relevant, and transformative eco-art education within the classroom and local community. My action research observations involved advanced high school art students, local ecologists, and various members of the community. Activities were incorporated within the spring 2014 semester within Cumberland County Tennessee. At various intervals throughout a nine-week time frame, students explored activities that incorporated environmental art themes. They worked within the classroom, but also traveled to specific local sites to discover nature and better understand the importance of conservation acts. One project that my students engaged in, involved painting rain barrels for the Obed Watershed Community Association. The barrels were provided by OWCA, embellished by us, and then were given back to the organization for auctioning purposes. This project was important in helping students better connect to their own local environments and landscapes. Rain barrels are beneficial as they can help prevent excess water overflow that often leads to erosion and water contamination. Since developed/paved areas of the city do not absorb rainfall well, rain barrels may also aid in the prevention of heavy water runoff that heads into our streams.

In order to improve upon my own implementation of newly designed environmental art lessons, I regularly assessed student understanding. As Hewitt & Little (2004) explained in “Leading Action Research in Schools” it is “Within the action research process, educators study student learning related to their own teaching. It is a process that allows educators to learn about their own instructional practices and to continue to monitor improved student learning.” (p.1).

## **Gathering Data**

I collected and analyzed qualitative data while conducting my research. To obtain numerical data for further analysis, I administered an opinion-rated survey to find out more about the environmental attitudes and concerns of my students. The results from the Likert rating scale that I created allowed me to chart percentages based on the perspectives of my students. I also used narrative feedback to inform my investigation. For instance, I read and analyzed student journal entries/drawings, notes, and interview questions to gather qualitative data on my students thoughts and reactions to assignments. I kept a journal of notes that helped me keep track of all of the discussions and planning involved in my participatory based activities (lessons that focused on collaborative partnerships).

Throughout the process of implementing the environmental art projects, I engaged in observational note taking, photography, and classroom assessment. In the end, I managed to compile a large collection of data that enabled me to better understand my investigation in its entirety. The credibility of my data was increased as I obtained information from diverse sources and various methods. This approach is referred to as triangulation. Craig Mertler (2011) describes the importance of gaining insights from multiple sources and findings. He defines the triangulation technique as “a process of relating multiple sources of data in order to establish their trustworthiness or verification of the consistency of the facts while trying to account for their inherent biases” (p. 12).

## **Developmental Process**

I found Mertler’s (2011) cyclic model most useful for conducting action research in this project. He defined a framework of study that involves four stages: 1. Planning; 2. Acting; 3. Developing; and 4. Reflecting. I generally followed these steps as I conducted my investigation.

Observations, reflection, and action are all important parts of action research, but the examiner has the ability to move back and forth throughout the stages of the model. The framework works like a spiral and allows the researcher to repeat and even rearrange steps. Cyclic designs such as this may help educational practitioners make improvements within their curriculum from year to year as changes are needed.

While in the planning stage of development, I began to define issues, enduring ideas, and essential questions that I wanted to address through my curriculum. I collected literature and resources that aided me in approaching the inquiries I planned for students. During the acting stage, I collected and analyzed the data. This was an important part in the development of my research as it informed me of the individualized needs, opinions, and thoughts that my students had during art activities and lessons. In addition, I learned more about the assets and needs of my partners. During the developing phase, I was able to make revisions and changes in my plans that help to improve my action plan. For instance, as my students completed KWL charts, I was able to assess student learning that helped inform my instruction. The last step in my research was vital as it allowed me to reflect on the results. The action research process “allows teachers to model being reflective and proactive in addressing classroom issues and concerns” (Field, T. (n.d.). Action research. Retrieved from <http://www.sitesupport.org/actionresearch/sitemap.shtml>). As I share and communicate my findings, I aspire to encourage other art teachers to think about the ways environmental practices can be more effectively incorporated into their curriculums.

As a teacher-observer, I gathered information that was specific to the neighborhood in which I teach. For instance, I worked with the Obed Watershed Community Association to create a special project that promoted sustainability and art within Crossville, TN. While recording the interactions that occurred during the process of creating theme-based rain barrel designs, I

encouraged my students to make stronger connections to self, community, and nature. The type of information I collected has allowed me to improve upon ecological practices that are important inside and outside of the classroom. For instance, “recycle, reduce, and reuse” is now a big focus for making my home, school, and community more eco-friendly. The evidence I gathered has led to enhanced collaborative projects that promote social activism. My students are now actively telling others within the city how their projects (based on environmental issues) were aimed at keeping streams in our area cleaner. They are also letting people know how they can get involved in eco-art projects to help improve sustainability.

### **Significance**

The importance of my study goes beyond the here and now. Sustainability practices help us to hold on to past traditions and those things we wish to share with future generations. I feel many art educators are interested in including ecology-themed art projects within their curriculum, though most only skim the surface of what might be potentially explored. My passion for environmental art education extends past the four walls of the everyday classroom and beckons me to investigate the power that resides outdoors, within nature. I feel it is the duty of educators to share with students the knowledge and importance of conservation. Within art education, the sensory experience becomes one of the greatest motivators to encourage environmental stewardship. Preservation is essential to life. Finn (2013) quotes Edward Burtynsky who said: “[we] come from nature... There is an importance to [having] a certain reverence for what nature is because we are connected to it... If we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves.” (Finn, para 11).

## **Findings**

During my study, I developed a high school art curriculum that was based on environmental art practices. My students concentrated on the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, and recycle) throughout the semester and consistently worked to create art that raised awareness about sustainability. The importance of preservation and conservation of the Obed River was a constant theme providing a local example of why ecological efforts are necessary. Not only did students create artworks out of recycled/reused items, they were part of a community rain barrel project that allowed them to see how local organizations work to improve ecosystems. My intentions with this project were to uncover a rationale for eco-art education in regards to sustainability, identity, and social interaction. Three important questions guided my investigation as I utilized action research to collect data (see page 7).

My findings suggest that environmental art education can lead to socially engaging projects that reflect purposeful design, strengthened communities, and conscious understanding of environmental stewardship. Throughout the rest of my paper, I will be focusing on these individual findings comprehensively.

### **Purposeful Design**

Throughout these past nine weeks, I witnessed how meaningful, relevant, and transformative environmental art education can be. My students have been working to create projects that have not only helped raise awareness about local ecological issues, but that also defined their own personal standpoints and individual viewpoints on aesthetics. Students were introduced to contemporary artists, who use their art making to present social commentaries and express their thoughts about sustainability. Open-ended projects were designed so that they might foster the growth of creativity and innovation. Activities were based on the importance of

the 3Rs and though all students had the same project guidelines it was apparent that each student was able to tell his or her personal story through the works that were produced. Students discovered that Cumberland County Tennessee has local watershed issues and that they could help address them.

### **Reduce**

The first project that students were introduced to involved developing a visual log of the things they were consuming on a regular basis. Within a sketchbook students were asked to draw consumable items. Most of them documented the things that they used, ate, bought, tossed or threw away. Many of them begin to use this as an opportunity to explore a wide array of mixed-media that allowed for a variety of outcomes in the images they made. As time went on some students even began to create “themed” based pages. Oftentimes, students concentrated on the various ways they consumed specific things such as water, electricity, paper products, and plastics. After students had produced approximately eight thumbnail sketches (Figure 2), we had a discussion about the ways in which waste has effects on the environment. Perspectives began to change as students begin to notice that they were throwing a lot of things away. One student even mentioned to me that she was “finding less and less things to illustrate in her book because she had been taking great strides in consuming much less.” The main objective of this lesson was to get students to reduce and become less wasteful.



Figure 2: Consumerism based sketches

Oftentimes I used worksheets, discussions, and charts to find out how much students knew about a particular topic. One type of assessment that I used when approaching the theme of “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle” was a KWL chart. A KWL chart details what students know about a subject, what they want to know, and what they learned after instruction is complete. I found that getting this type of feedback is extremely vital in helping students understand just how important their words and ideas are. We developed the following chart together as a class (Figure 3):



**KWL Chart**  
Before you begin your research, list details in the first two columns. Fill in the last column after completing your research.

Topic <u>The Three R's</u>		
What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned
Involves use of recycling bins	How much garbage does America produce annually?	250 million tons
We can recycle waste such as plastic and glass	Ways to reduce waste...	creation of compost pile
The 3 R's can help save the world/environment	What are some effects of recycling?	Recycling one ton of paper saves seventeen trees
Unused waste is often recycled	Recycling percentages...	Only 2 percent of plastic is recycled in the U.S.
We can lessen the amount of trash in landfills	How do I find out more about where to recycle within the city?	Contact local community recycle center.
We should use biodegradable products if possible	How much do consumers buy that could be recycled?	25 billion plastic containers and 30 billion bottles/jars each year.
It's important to conserve	What could I create that might help?	I could make my own re-usable lunch box instead of using plastic bags.

Figure 3: KWL chart for 3Rs

## Recycle and Reuse

Students were asked to consider the ways plastics in particular might create problems with regard to the streams in the county. I asked them specifically “How does plastic contamination within water streams create negative impacts?” Student responses included:

“You might drink the water and then get sick.”

“It could hurt aquatic creatures if they were to swallow plastic.”

“Water absorbs into the soil and we grow things in the soil. If the water is polluted then our ground would be, too.”

After our discussion about litter and the damage it can cause within nature, we began an art project that allowed students to consider the concept of recycling and reuse. Our first objective

was to get plastic bags out of the environment and into craft. Much preparation had to take place before we could get started. We began to ask people around the school, to rid their cabinets and drawers of plastic bags. We even removed plastic bags from recycling bins. With the collected bags and some leftover cardboard, we developed plarn (plastic yarn) and loom apparatuses so that we could weave together eco-inspired art forms.

The results were astounding as students innovatively produced purses, satchels, bags, soft toys, lunch boxes, accessories, and so much more. One student even commented that she wanted to make plarn blankets within a local church group so that they might help out the homeless on the streets. The overall experience of the project allowed students to consider how they might use post-consumer materials for design purposes before throwing items into the trash. Students began to understand the efforts that they could make at home, at school, and within the city.

Figure 4 shows “Bag Bag,” which a student created out of plarn. The piece received an honorable mention at the Cumberland Art Society’s High School Art Competition:



Figure 4: Plarn Bag Project

### **Strengthened Communities**

Productive and meaningful collaboration occurred as students learned how to work in teams. They discovered how much progress could be made when group members share roles and responsibilities. They also learned to listen to others' perspectives and opinions as they developed pieces of work that combined the ideas of multiple artists. It helped to bring students together who may have never otherwise shared thoughts or viewpoints. Communication became strengthened, and a sense of pride was developed as students developed social cohesion. Students often felt strong and confident as they constructed works of art for the greater good of the community.

### **Bottle Sculptures**

Countless people within the Cumberland County High School community delivered their recycled water bottles to help my students as we began to make our Dale Chihuly-inspired sculptures. Seeing how a school works as a community definitely triggered a reaction from the students. People wanted to get involved as much as possible as they knew we were developing artworks that were not only unique, but based on the concept of eco-friendly design. My students liked the attention they were getting from other teachers, staff members, and peers. The hallways were often buzzing with people trying to peer through our classroom window to see what we were up to. Throughout the design process, students planned their works with thoughtfulness and care. They wrote and drew things that inspired them, they delegated who would paint or cut that day. They even installed the pieces as a group. Collaboration allowed them to establish shared identities as they communicated and problem-solved together as a team. Viewers were in awe once they observed the finished sculptures which consisted of towers and chandeliers all taking on their own stylistic approach. Several students and teachers during observation would remark

“I never would have thought you could make something this beautiful out of something that would have just been thrown away.” It was a great lesson, not only for my class, but also for others who were interested in our projects. Figure 5 shows a group working together to construct a chandelier (the idea was to reflect summer warmth and vibrant colors within a flower garden):



Figure 5: Team construction (bottle sculpture)

### **Rain barrels**

One of the last environmental art activities that I planned for the classroom involved the implementation of an *ecovention*. Dennis Gregg, the director that oversees our local Obed Watershed Community Association (OWCA), paid a visit to our class to discuss the issues affecting our local water streams. He discussed the importance of preserving historical areas so that they could be enjoyed by future generations. OWCA works to remove debris from the rivers, they re-build embankments, and they create gardens that help to resolve issues of rainwater

overflow. As a promoter of place-based education, Gregg encouraged students to go outside and visualize the damage that happens right outside of our own school. Due to our large paved parking lot, and flat top roof design, we had major issues that students weren't even aware of. He went on to discuss how every time it rains, the water from our parking lot and roof travels downward towards our football field area. Gregg mentioned that the beginning point for one of the Obed tributaries (which eventually leads to the Obed River) is located at the end of our football field. That meant that any trash, debris, or pollutants (including oil and antifreeze that drip on the parking lot or pesticides used on the lawn) that were left outside our campus would more than likely wash on down to this small stream.

Students were well informed as to how collaboration could lead to ecological improvements. Students became enthusiastic about contributing to OWCA and their own community as we set out to paint rain barrels. The classroom had learned about the importance of conserving and preserving water, and felt it would be important to become part of the solution. As they painted reservoirs as teams, they were asked to think about what they would miss most if environmental disasters made a crucial impact on their local surroundings. Many of the students reflected on things in nature that they found to be aesthetically pleasing, as well as activities they liked to engage in while outdoors (Figure 6). Some even considered things they enjoyed along their own property lines and yards at home. Our goal was to inform the public about erosion prevention, and the importance of water conservation.

My students enjoyed being a part of this collaborative project as they worked in teams and formed a partnership with OWCA that led them to become effective public advocates for river conservation. In May, we plan to participate in OWCA's rain barrel auction that will be



held during the “Sustainability Fair.” All money raised will go towards OWCA to further promote their projects that highlight ecological efforts.



Figure 6: Community Rain Barrel Project

### Conscious Understanding

Throughout the environmental art curriculum, I felt that my students were developing a strong conscious understanding based on their own moral standpoints. They were consistently defining what was most important to them in terms of conservation and preservation. As they engaged in activities they were allowed to have an opinion, a voice that was *freeing* for many students. Their participation in eco-art allowed them to see their own carbon footprint, and they became more conscious of how much they do play a part in environmental concerns.

Student contemplation became most apparent to me as I begin to analyze what students had posted on their classroom Web pages. For instance, one student seemed to focus on the effects of consumerism as she quoted Aristotle, who once said, “Madness is badness of spirit when one seeks profit from all sources.” Another student expressed the ways nature had influenced her as she created art. She posted this quote by Napoleon Hill, “We begin to see, therefore, the importance of selecting our environment with the greatest of care, because environment is the mental feeding ground out of which the food that goes into our minds is extracted.” As I looked at countless student pages, I found a common reoccurrence. Many

students had found environmental artists, projects, and nature to be inspirational. Figure 7 displays a student's posted picture of a captivating waterfall. Above the photo the caption reads "Inspiring to the fullest" and underneath he developed a hand written quote that states, "Life is like a Waterfall. It simply rushes past." As soon as I looked over his page, I realized that this student in particular had been motivated by our talks of nature and its impermanence.

*Inspiring to the Fullest*



*Life is like a Waterfall. It simply rushes past.*

Figure 7: Student Weebly Page

### **Environmental Art Survey**

Forty of my students took a survey at the beginning and ending of the environmental art unit (Appendix A and B). The questionnaire was created on SurveyMonkey.com and was devised so that I might better interpret the environmental attitudes of the youth in my classroom. Since this survey was anonymous, I assume that many students felt that they could be honest, and open as they knew their identity was protected. Several students alluded to feeling more relaxed due to the fact that their feedback would be kept private. The findings of the questionnaire were

interesting and helpful to interpreting the outcomes of my study. After analyzing the survey results, I was pleased to see that there was almost a twenty percent increase (from January to March) in regard to the statement “If art and ecology were connected it would make a difference in the world.” It also became clear to me that though students could make more improvements in how they conserve and preserve, they are now becoming much more conscious about what they throw away. The majority of my students have voiced that they now think about recycling and re-use more than they ever did in the past. The survey reveals that most are considering new uses for old/found items before simply tossing things into the trash.

As I examined students’ responses to the environmental attitudinal survey that I administered, I felt reassured that my lessons led students to become more knowledgeable about sustainability. The questionnaire results show that prior to my eco-art lessons, students knew less about what the community was doing in order to help improve sustainability. Only 48 percent acknowledged that we had ecological issues in Cumberland County. Though the majority of my students enjoyed being outdoors and saw the ways art promoted the importance of nature, most were ignorant of the ways we could help preserve things for future generations. After the same survey was given at the end of my unit, the viewpoints had changed to some degree.

When analyzing the qualitative data before me, I felt refreshed to see an increase in many of the students’ attitudes and environmental practices that I had hoped for. Though I know there is room for improvement, I do think the results of my study show a more serious consideration on the part of my students towards improved daily actions. Some students even gave feedback as to why they wanted to participate in environmental efforts and wrote brief summaries on the questionnaire. I especially appreciated a thoughtful message that read, “Human development is



making a huge impact on the environment, and people need to do what they can to help before it's too late.”

## **Conclusion**

My goal to design and implement an environmental art curriculum was one that I felt was necessary. I grew up surrounded by nature, and have always enjoyed all that it has to offer. As I watch the youth of today, I often worry that my students are not forming the same relationship to the outside world as former generations once have. Oftentimes, technological advances steer us into a virtual world where adventures outdoors are becoming rarer. Teachers can help students form a deeper respect for the environment by incorporating projects that tie together art and ecology. Through my study, I helped to bring these ideas to the forefront in my school and community.

In sharing my work, I hope to encourage other art educators to implement environmental art projects into their curriculums. My students learned a great deal about the impact we have on the world, and our own local city. Countless students mentioned to me that the only reason that had not become more involved in environmental projects in the past was because they had never had the opportunity. Because of my lessons, many will continue to increase and improve upon their own global stewardship. I am a true believer that eco-art studies help students to form deeper connections with the environment. As I reflect upon my study, I can truly say that my project made a difference in the lives of my students.

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## APPENDIX A

Questions Asked (Forty Students)	Preliminary Survey	Follow-up Survey
1. I find the outdoors to be an enjoyable place to spend time	90% (Strongly agree/agree)	90% (Strongly agree/agree)
2. I believe artworks can promote the importance of nature	90% (Strongly agree/agree)	90% (Strongly agree/agree)
3. My community makes strong efforts to preserve and conserve	20% (Strongly agree/agree)	44% (Strongly agree/agree)
4. Environmentally friendly acts have priority in my life	45% neither agreed or disagree	59% neither agree or disagree
5. If art and ecology were connected it would make a difference in the world	40% (Strongly agree/agree)	59% (Strongly agree/agree)
6. I have fears that my community may have ecological issues	48% (Strongly agree/agree)	59% (Strongly agree/agree)
7. I worry about how environmental problems will affect future generations	40% agree	46% agree
8. I believe that human development is impacting on ecosystems	85% (Strongly agree/agree)	87% (Strongly agree/agree)
9. I think our daily actions can make a difference in health and longevity of our environment	65% agree	69% agree
10. I recycle	60% sometimes	62% sometimes
11. I try to imagine new uses for old/found items before tossing things into the trash	33% sometimes	59% sometimes
12. I use "green" products	70% sometimes	67% sometimes
13. I limit the water that I use (ex. shower, faucet, and water hose)	28% neither agree or disagree	33% neither agree or disagree
14. I encourage others to participate in environmental efforts	43% neither agree or disagree	44% neither agree or disagree

## APPENDIX B

**Environmental Survey**

1. I find the outdoors to be an enjoyable place to spend time

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

2. I believe artworks can promote the importance of nature

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

3. My community makes strong efforts to preserve and conserve

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

4. Environmentally friendly acts have priority in my life

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

5. If art and ecology were connected it would make a difference in the world

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

6. I have fears that my community may have ecological issues

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

7. I worry about how environmental problems will affect future generations

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

8. I believe that human development is impacting on ecosystems

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly



**9.** I think our daily actions can make a difference in health and longevity of our environment

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly

**10.** I recycle

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**11.** I try to imagine new uses for old/found items before tossing things into the trash

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**12.** I use “green” products

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**13.** I limit the water that I use (ex. shower, faucet, and water hose)

- Agree Strongly
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Disagree Strongly



## APPENDIX C

**UFIRB 02 – Social & Behavioral Research****Protocol Submission Form**

*This form must be typed. Send this form and the supporting documents to IRB02, PO Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611. Should you have questions about completing this form, call 352-392-0433.*

<b>Title of Protocol:</b>	Eco-Art Education: Interdependence within Natural and Social Environments		
<b>Principal Investigator:</b> Annette Saldana			
		<b>UFID #:</b> [REDACTED]	
<b>Degree / Title:</b>	MA Art Ed	<b>Mailing Address:</b> (If on campus include PO Box address):	<b>Email:</b> [REDACTED]
<b>Department:</b>	Art Education	[REDACTED]	<b>Telephone #:</b> [REDACTED]
<b>Co-Investigator(s):</b> None			
		<b>UFID#:</b>	<b>Email:</b>
<b>Supervisor (If PI is student):</b> Dr. Craig Roland			
		<b>UFID#:</b>	
<b>Degree / Title:</b>		<b>Mailing Address:</b> (If on campus include PO Box address):	<b>Email :</b>
<b>Department:</b>			<b>Telephone #:</b>

<b>Date of Proposed Research:</b>	January 20-March 14 (spring 2014)	
<b>Source of Funding</b> <i>(A copy of the grant proposal must be submitted with this protocol if funding is involved):</i>	N/A	
<p><b>Scientific Purpose of the Study:</b></p> <p>I am inspecting various types of participatory activities that can be incorporated into eco-art studies in order to create meaningful learning experiences. My goal is to gather data that will help in the creation of successful curriculum implementation. I have hopes that my research study will result in students' becoming more conscious of interdependence within both natural and social environments through visual art education that focuses on ecological issues.</p>		
<p><b>Describe the Research Methodology in Non-Technical Language:</b> <i>(Explain what will be done with or to the research participant.)</i></p> <p>I plan to document the process of eco-art making, while implementing participatory based art projects that lead to the betterment of surrounding neighborhoods. The findings and data that I compile will be used as a means to explore meaningful, relevant, and transformative eco-art education within the classroom and local community. My action research observations will involve advanced high school art students, local ecologists, and various members of the community. Data will be collected as I read and analyze journal entries/drawings, notes, survey/interview questions produced by students and select community members. (***)Please see enclosed draft of the "survey/questionnaire".</p>		
<p><b>Describe Potential Benefits:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Promotion of social activism</li> <li>-Community involvement</li> <li>-Environmental awareness</li> <li>-Environmental preservation/conservation within Cumberland County, Tennessee</li> </ul>		

**Describe Potential Risks:** (If risk of physical, psychological or economic harm may be involved, describe the steps taken to protect participant.)

**No potential risks are expected.**

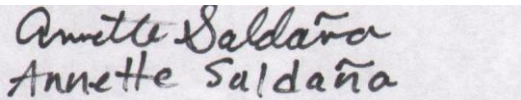
**Describe How Participant(s) Will Be Recruited:**

I will recruit students who are enrolled in my advanced art courses at Cumberland County High School. I will also interact with adult members associated with the Cumberland County Obed Watershed Community Association.

<b>Maximum Number of Participants (to be approached with consent)</b>	60	<b>Age Range of Participants:</b>	15-65	<b>Amount of Compensation/ course credit:</b>	None
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**Describe the Informed Consent Process.** (Attach a Copy of the Informed Consent Document. See <http://irb.ufl.edu/irb02/samples.html> for examples of consent.)

**(SIGNATURE SECTION)**

<b>Principal Investigator(s) Signature:</b>		<b>Date:</b>
<b>Co-Investigator(s) Signature(s):</b>		<b>Date:</b>
<b>Supervisor's Signature (if PI is a student):</b>		<b>Date:</b>
<b>Department Chair Signature:</b>		<b>Date:</b>

## APPENDIX D

**Cumberland County High School Parent/Guardian Consent Form**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am currently teaching art at CCHS, and your child is enrolled in my class. Along with teaching, I am also working on a Master's Degree in Art Education at the University of Florida. My final research project is called "Eco-Art Education: Interdependence within Natural and Social Environments." Eco-Art Education combines studies in Ecology and Art, and often involves themes that relate to sustainability. Students will learn about artists whose work involved environmental preservation, will explore nature, and develop creative solutions to preservation and conservation issues in our community.

During the spring 2014 semester, I plan to document the process of eco-art making, while implementing participatory-based art projects that lead to the betterment of surrounding neighborhoods. My goal is for students to become more conscious of interdependence, within both natural and social environments, through visual art education that focuses on ecological issues. With your permission, I would like your child to be a participant in my research study.

The findings and data that I compile will be used as a means to explore meaningful, relevant, and transformative eco-art education within the classroom and local community. Data will be collected as I read and analyze journal entries, drawings, notes, survey/interview questions produced by students and select community members. Participants will be asked a series of questions regarding their knowledge/attitude towards environmental practices. At times, volunteers may be recorded and documented by the researcher for educational purposes only. Participants will be anonymous and identity will be protected in any research reports. When addressing survey/interview responses, I will use pseudonyms (i.e. fake names) for the participants concerned. Participation in this research study is wholly voluntary. Refusal to partake in this study will not result in any penalty, and withdrawal from this study is permitted at any time, also with no penalty. If students choose not to engage in surveys/interviews, this will not affect their grade or future placement within the art program. There is no monetary compensation provided to volunteers in this study. Students will receive no direct benefit from taking part in this research project. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this investigation.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at [REDACTED] or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Craig Roland, at [croland@arts.ufl.edu](mailto:croland@arts.ufl.edu). Questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352)392-0433.

Sincerely,  
Annette Saldana

I have read the above statement and voluntarily give my consent for my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in Annette Saldana's capstone study based on Eco-Art Education. I have received a copy of this consent statement.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent / Guardian    Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### **Informed Consent Form**

**Protocol Title:** Eco-Art Education: Interdependence within Natural and Social Environments

**Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

#### **Purpose of the research study:**

I am inspecting various types of participatory activities that can be incorporated into eco-art studies in order to create meaningful learning experiences. My goal is to gather data that will help in the creation of successful curriculum implementation. I have hopes that my research study will result in students' becoming more conscious of interdependence within both natural and social environments through visual art education that focuses on ecological issues.

#### **What you will be asked to do during project studies:**

You will be asked a series of questions regarding your knowledge/attitude towards environmental practices. At times, you may be recorded and documented by the researcher for educational purposes only. I plan to document your reactions as we interact during the planning stages of the project, as well as within interviews.

#### **Time required:**

30 minutes-1 hour

#### **Risks and Benefits:**

No potential risks in the study are expected. The benefits are that by volunteering you will have an opportunity to promote social activism, community involvement, environmental awareness, and environmental preservation/conservation.

#### **Compensation:**

There is no monetary compensation provided to volunteers in this study.

#### **Confidentiality:**

As a volunteer, you will have the right of anonymity and your identity will be protected to the extent provided by law. When addressing your interview/survey responses, the researchers will use pseudonyms (i.e. fake names) to the participants concerned. Your actual name and image will not be used within research unless you have given your explicit permission.

#### **Voluntary participation:**

Participation in this research study is wholly voluntary. Refusal to partake in this study will not result in any penalty.

**Right to withdraw from the study:**

Withdrawal from this study is permitted at any time and will not result in penalty or negative consequences.

**Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:**

Annette Saldana, MA Art Education student, University of Florida.

Craig Roland, Director of Online MA in Art Education, croland@arts.ufl.edu

**Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:**

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

**Agreement:**

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and

I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX F

### Assent Script

Dear Student(s):

My name Annette Saldana and I am a graduate student at the University of Florida. I am asking you to participate in a project that examines environmental art education. During the spring 2014 semester, I hope to incorporate meaningful, relevant, and transformative environmental education within our classroom and local community. However, to get a better understanding about your knowledge and attitudes concerning the environment, I will need to compile data and information. I am asking you to complete a short questionnaire that will be given to you twice. You are asked to take the survey before and after our environmental art study begins. The questionnaire will take approximately thirty minutes to complete. Your parents or legal guardians have already given permission for you to volunteer in this study, but you have the right to decline my offer to participate. You may withdrawal from this study at any time by simply writing on the survey "Stop" or "I do not wish to participate." Your participation in this study will not affect your grades or placement in the CCHS art program. In addition to the questionnaire(s), I plan to document your work and your interactions as you engage in environmental art projects. There are no known risks involved in this study and you will receive no compensation for your participation. You will receive no direct benefits by taking part in this study. When addressing survey/interview responses, I will use pseudonyms (i.e. fake names) to protect your identity.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me in person (CCHS/Room # [REDACTED]) or email me at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Annette Saldana

### Agreement

I agree to participate in this research project and I have received a copy of this form.

Student's Name (Please Print)

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

## LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1</i> Chart of terms obtained from the Green Museum website.....	p. #10
<i>Figure 2</i> Consumerism based sketches .....	p. #21
<i>Figure 3</i> KWL chart for 3Rs .....	p. #22
<i>Figure 4</i> Plarn Bag Project .....	p. #23
<i>Figure 5</i> Team construction (bottle sculpture) .....	p. #25
<i>Figure 6</i> Community Rain Barrel Project.....	p. #27
<i>Figure 7</i> Student Weebly Page .....	p. #28

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

**~Artist/Art Educator at CCHS: Annette Saldaña~**



Since I was a young child, my parents taught me to value my education. During my childhood, my mother was a Sunday school teacher and my father was a police officer. They rooted within me strong moral values in hopes that I would become a trustworthy, thoughtful, and helpful member of society. It was instilled within me that I could do and be anything as long as my heart was in it. It was also very clear to me that my head had to be in it, too. I knew that I needed a great education in order to reach my goals. I was blessed to be surrounded by inspirational people who nourished my ambitions. For instance, my mother and grandfather (both public school educators) always bought me interesting books in hopes that I would gain an independent thirst for knowledge. It worked!

I feel lucky that I had opportunities to explore my creativity as that is what has led me to where I am. I began making arts and crafts at a very young age. I had a mom who taught me how to make handmade crafts on rainy days, a sister with whom I would explore filmmaking/storytelling with, summer camp art workshop teachers, and a grandmother who taught me how to make an assortment of handcrafted goods. In high school, I became involved in art, poetry, and vocal performance. From there, the doors of opportunity opened as I knew my calling. I knew I wanted to study art in college. After obtaining a degree in “Housing and Design”, I became an interior designer. The epiphany for me probably occurred when I married a high school vocal music teacher (whom I met in college). As I began to see how he used both his love for the arts, but also his love of sharing this gift, I knew immediately that this was what I wanted to do. Tennessee Tech and the University of Florida both prepared me well to teach art education to my students. Not only did I learn valuable teaching methods, I studied a myriad of art making skills, and became an advocate for the arts. I am now doing what I dreamed of all of these years, I am sharing my passion for creativity with others.