

Spring 2012

Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Abigale, "Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City" (2012). *Community Action Forum: Seidenberg School*. Paper 12.
http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/forum_seidenberg/12

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Biography

This is my first semester at Pace and I am looking forward to experiencing all Pace has to offer. I am a transfer student and originally from New Mexico. I hope to bring creativity and innovation to my partner project.

Although I have volunteered for various community service projects, I believe most of my experience comes from unofficial volunteer work and real world experience.

I have worked with children of varying ages, in both school and team environments. I was the head coach of a children's swim team with 82 members. In this setting, patience was a must. These were great experiences, as I was able to meet with several groups of children over a period of time and see how they function in their school environment versus the chaos of the swimming pool.

Me





As the middle of the semester has caught up with us, it is time to pause and review the progress that Emily and I have made on her project. These last few weeks have been filled with art, exploration and getting to know one another. I think one of the keys to a successful project, is the ability to relate to your partner. In getting to know Emily, I attempt to learn as much as possible about her likes and dislikes. This part is relatively easy, as Emily will

always answer questions about her preferences. However, it is more about what Emily doesn't say that I am interested in learning more about.

In *DisabilityLand*, Brightman discusses the limitations that society puts on individuals with disabilities. Often, individuals with disabilities are not seen as average people wandering through the streets of New York City. Instead, they are identified by their disability first and then judged on their handling of the disability before they are ever seen as a person. This deprives them of having any sort of an individual identity. In a segment in Part III of the book, Brightman discusses the struggles that many individuals with communication difficulties routinely experience. In an poster produced by the Spastics Society of Great Britain, attached was an image of a child that was unable to speak. Underneath the image was the tag line, "Just because I couldn't speak, they thought I had nothing to say." Emily too has issues verbally communicating her feelings in full and expressive detail. However, I believe she says a lot in her physical actions and even in her absence of words. Since Emily tends to be less verbally expressive, it is my goal in our project to make sure that she always has a voice and a means to express herself. I do my best to listen to Emily, even when she isn't speaking.

To work best with Emily, I have attempted to learn about her preferences, such as her love of Koala bears or her craving for Popeye's Chicken. I've learned that she one day hopes to visit Europe to explore historical landmarks and cathedrals, like Big Ben and Notre Dame. Emily wants to travel to Australia and see Koala Bears in their natural environment. I also learned that she likes to visit some of New York City's notable landmarks, such as the Museum of Natural History or the South Street Sea Port. In fact, Emily was recently my tour guide to the South Street Sea Port, an area of NYC that I have never visited before. In discussing all of these places and things, I also find that Emily likes to shop, and then shop some more! In learning all of these things about Emily, she sounds like a typical young woman, looking to experience the joys of life. Her goals and aspirations are very similar those of her peers. I believe many of us aspire to be world travelers and see things we have only read about. I myself like many of the same things that Emily likes. I too have cravings for Popeye's chicken in the middle of the afternoon and I one day hope to visit Australia and wouldn't mind seeing a few koala bears in the process. These are all relatively common aspirations and shared by many of us. When you put them all down on paper, you find many more similarities than you do differences. If someone were not able to see beyond the fact that Emily does not verbally communicate as thoroughly as others, then they would miss out on the opportunity to meet a fellow traveler, dreamer and artist.

Brightman discusses another print ad in that has a beautifully photographed image of nine disabled individuals and a caption reading, "When you're disabled, you have to be very determined not to do what people expect you to do. Which is very little. Instead you have to demand more of yourself than you think you can accomplish. And then some." Although I do not fall into the category of a disabled individual, I can certainly relate to this quote. In general, society needs labels. It makes life easier and less confusing and scary for them. If you don't fit into a specific box, people frequently don't know how to handle you and will attempt to "put you in your place". Although

this is certainly a greater reflection of that individuals own insecurities, it is all too commonly accepted behavior. I've gone through life with people informing me of how things are "normally" done or should be done. I've had people attempt to size me up and limit my potential. And I know what it feels like not to have a voice. Despite all of this, I have learned to not listen, which is an art. I have learned to think and speak for myself and demand that I be heard and never placed in a box. If I'm going to take responsibility for my decisions, then why would I listen to anyone else? Although I recognize the limitations that society attempts to put on all of us and despite my attempts to ignore them, I also realize that Emily must struggle with these same frustrations. I suspect that her frustrations are amplified on every level, as not only is she not seen for who she is, but she literally struggles with the ability to fully express herself. While I am able to stand here and say that I am capable of speaking for myself and making my own decisions, Emily is not. This why it think it is important to explore every possible means to make communication more accessible to Emily and other individuals like her. Maybe it's not that Emily can't communicate fully, maybe we just haven't found a way for her to do it.

With the use of technology, new doors are opening up and greater opportunities for progress are possible. Although Brightman warns that we should not strictly rely on technology to directly improve the lives of individuals with disabilities, he does note that technology can provide you the opportunity to, "let the world know who you are." In our partner projects, we are attempting to do just that. While all of our projects have taken on various forms, they are all focused on means of expression. These projects give our partners the opportunity to, not only express themselves, but to find value in what they do. When Emily draws or creates art, she is calmed by the process and she truly enjoys her projects. There is value in Emily's art and to have others see her art and recognize her art, validates her work. This is the same validation that we all crave and strive for. With the use of the iPad, I wish to create greater opportunities for Emily to more fully express herself. Regardless of the requirements for this semester, I hope that Emily walks away with additional tools to aid her in her daily communication and allow her to utilize her unused capacities. I hope she experiences increased confidence as a result of what she has learned from our project and apply it to her social interactions. Ultimately, that is the greater goal. If this is what technology can bring to the table, then I think the exploration of that technology is critical.

In our final project, I am hoping to bring together all of Emily's worlds and display them with the use of technology. Although Emily enjoys drawing, I believe that is only one aspect of her artistic interests and do not want to limit her project to one specific area of interest. Instead, I hope to pull together experiences and images that help to paint a more complete picture of Emily. Since Emily is certainly not one dimensional, I believe her project should also be multidimensional and reflect her many interests. In doing this, I hope that Emily discovers some additional talents, related to the things that she most enjoys. This is why I really enjoy our trips outside of the walls of AHRC. Each time we head to a new environment, I learn a little bit more about Emily and see her reactions to the various areas of the city that we are exploring. Again, this gives me greater insight into who Emily is as an individual. As

Brightman quotes, "The great pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do." I agree with this logic and look forward to creating a project that Emily will be proud to attach her name to.

My Final Reflection Journal on My Project

In reflecting on the past 4 months, it's hard to imagine that this all began as what I thought would be a simple computer class. Surprise – it wasn't! While this course certainly challenges our technological abilities, the greater challenge was learning to work with a stranger. What many of us soon found out, is that these strangers soon became a regular part of our week.

We were tasked with teaching our partners how to use the various forms of technology that we had been assigned, the results of which would be displayed in a final presentation at the end of the semester. This was no small task. Working with a partner can be challenging. With two minds, two opinions and two points of view competing to be heard, it can be daunting to develop a cohesive collaboration. However, with any successful partnership, patience and the ability to listen are essential. I have learned to use these two skills in my personal and professional life. With this, I entered into my partner project with open ears and no preconceived notions of what to expect, doing my best to let each day unfold and then observe the resulting effects of that day. In doing this, I was able to learn a tremendous amount about my partner, Emily.

At first glance, Emily is a quiet and seemingly shy individual. She sits and remains focused on various projects, such as, puzzle making, drawing, crossword puzzles and a variety of other creative projects. She can seem closed off during these moments of focus, but in reality, she seems to truly enjoy being in the presence of others. With Emily, communication is an issue. She does not thoroughly express herself verbally, so communicating openly with others can be daunting. At times, Emily can become overwhelmed with emotion, resulting in greater frustration, for lack of ability to communicate. For anyone, it is important to connect to others. This connection is so critical that it is hard to imagine what one would do if they felt they had no voice. With my initial observations of Emily, I could see this frustration and I knew that I wanted to do all that I could to ensure that Emily felt she had a voice. With the iPad 2, Emily and I were given a communication outlet. Initially, this allowed us to connect on an artistic level that Emily was comfortable with, but eventually led us to a greater appreciation of one another.

In analyzing human interaction and relationships, we typically don't conjure up images of electronic tools and portable communication devices, however, for some, these devices are a link to interacting with their peers. For Emily, the iPad 2 was an outlet for emotion, expression and communication. With this particular tool, Emily was able

to participate in all of her favorite activities and document her every day. It also gave her the ability to create art projects, something that Emily enjoys. On top of the creative tools, we downloaded free communication apps that Emily could use to better express herself. However, it was the artistic applications that opened up greater communication between us and began an ongoing dialog about Emily's interests. With each drawing that Emily created, I learned a little more. I would ask her about her photos and I eventually began to notice a pattern. Emily frequently draws based on her surroundings. On a sunny day, Emily will draw flowers and images of the sun and tall palm trees. In the months of February and March, she drew hearts and four leaf clovers, reflecting the big holidays of the season. These are very small examples of my observations and Emily's abilities, but the greater lesson that I learn is that Emily has a lot to say. In our time together, I noticed a shift in our relationship. There came a point where this was no longer a class assignment with 2 independent individuals, but a connection between two friends.

My proudest moment was toward the end of our project when Emily watched the final video we developed. She was completely focused on the short 3 minute video and I could tell that she liked it. At the end, she had a subtle grin and said enthusiastically that it was good. Reading into her reaction, I think she enjoyed it, because it showed who she is and displayed more than one side of her personality. What words sometimes cannot express, art and film can assist in filling in the emotional gaps. This is certainly the case with Emily.

As time passed, Emily began asking me when I would be returning to AHRC. At this point, I realized how much our interaction and project meant to her. What I also realized, is that I looked forward to our visits as much as she did. In fact, with all of my courses at Pace, my partner project was the only course work I found exciting enough to discuss with my friends. Now that our project is officially complete, I realize that these Thursday interactions will no longer be required. It is easy to meet with someone when the hours are already carved into your weekly schedule, but it is a concerted effort with a busy schedule that will continue to make those visits possible. After all of this is said and done, I intend to visit Emily, along with the entire group at William Street, as much as possible. I feel like I have come to know everyone and certainly will feel their absence. Since the beginning of our projects, I have seen growth in everyone. This became apparent when we first presented our partner projects on April 19th.

The presentations on the 19th were an opportunity for everyone to shine and demonstrate what they had been working on for the past 4 months. For Emily, she stood in front of the crowd and introduced everyone to her art and talent. She never missed a beat and she shined in that moment and was excited and confident. Today, at the main AHRC office, she did the same. She held the microphone and with very minimal prompting, showed everyone her art. She was great and fully confident about her presentation. Not only did she excel in her personal presentation, but she enjoyed watching the presentations of the other students and their partners. Overall, I believe she enjoyed

the experience and although there were some tears at the end, she left happy. For me, I left feeling like Emily and I had both grown as a result of our partner project.

As a result of this course, I frequently find myself sitting around and thinking about other tools that could be downloaded as a communication outlet for Emily. Technology is such a critical part of my life and with my experience and knowledge; I want to do all I can to provide similar information and resources to Emily, regardless of the duration of our project. I think technology is so commonplace that it is frequently taken for granted by many of us. What seems like a simple touch screen device to some is a door to a whole new world of opportunities. Ideally, these devices would be available for everyone, but that is simply not the case. However, AHRC's continued partnership with the students of Pace will afford many individuals the opportunity to experience this technology first hand. This course is an excellent opportunity for both the individuals at AHRC and Pace to learn from one another. There are many individuals that make this program possible; everyone from the students and their partners, to the AHRC staff and the professor (of course). It is a collaborative effort by all of these individuals that have made our presentations possible and aided in the overall success of the program. For this, I believe everyone deserves their moment and due credit.

An Image

